

# THE CALL

THE LIFE AND MESSAGE OF  
THE APOSTLE PAUL

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**The Call**

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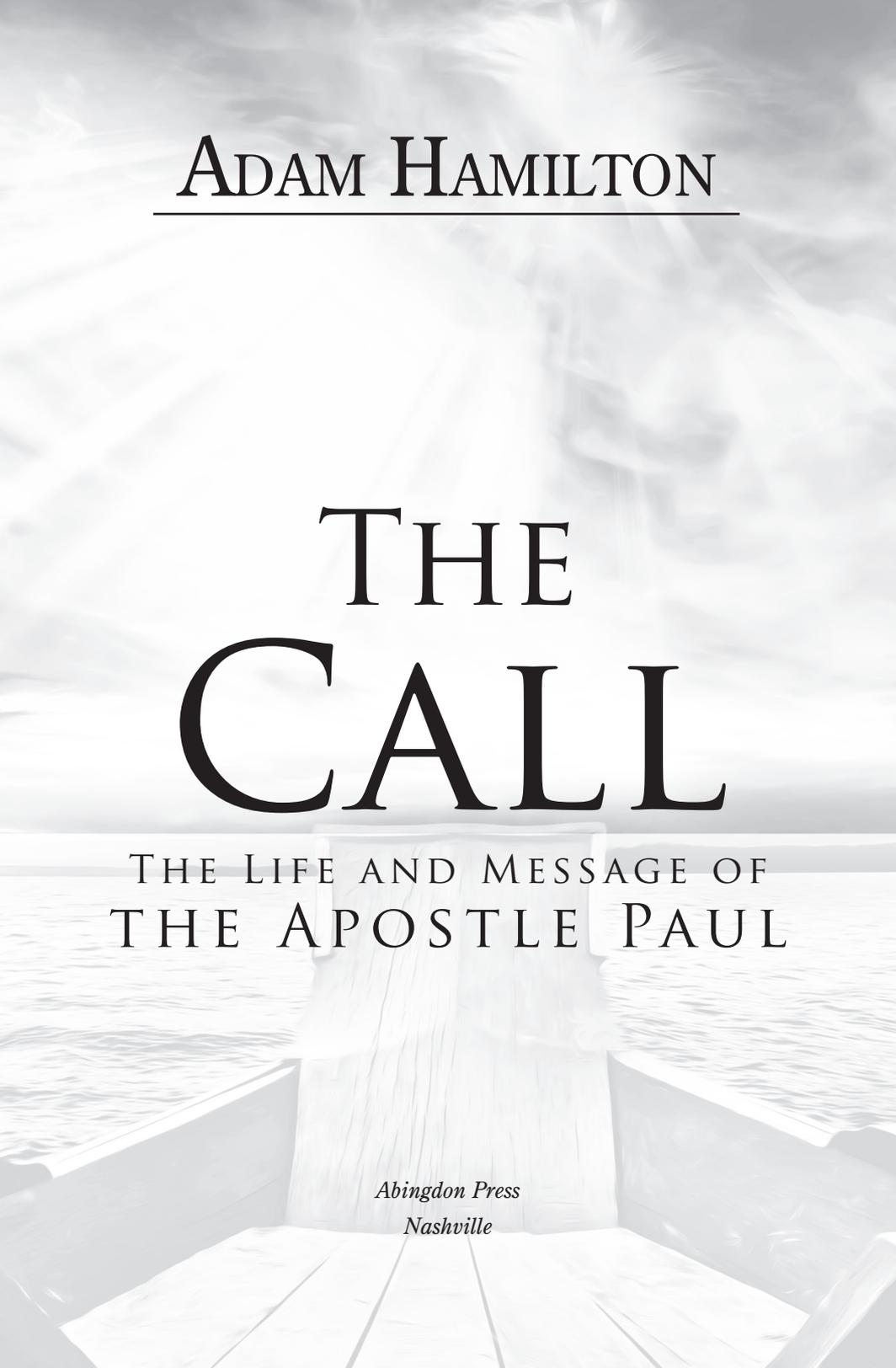
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ADAM HAMILTON

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THE  
CALL

THE LIFE AND MESSAGE OF  
THE APOSTLE PAUL

*Abingdon Press*  
*Nashville*

# THE CALL: THE LIFE AND MESSAGE OF THE APOSTLE PAUL

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*In memory of Pastor Phil Hollis,  
who helped me to hear God's call to  
follow Jesus and then encouraged me  
to answer God's call to be a pastor.  
I am forever indebted to him.*



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# INTRODUCTION

It could reasonably be argued that no other human, apart from Jesus himself, has had a greater impact on the world than Paul of Tarsus. His theological reflections on the meaning of Jesus' life, death, and resurrection have had a profound impact upon every branch of the Christian faith. His missionary journeys took the gospel across the Roman world. He mentored many second-generation Christian leaders. Thirteen of the New Testament's twenty-seven books are attributed to him, and one-half of the Acts of the Apostles is devoted to telling his story. Today, one-third of the world's population look to his writings for inspiration, spiritual direction, and ethical guidance, more than follow the teachings of Muhammad, the Buddha, and Confucius combined.

Yet Paul is not without his critics. Jews typically see Paul as a misguided and even apostate first-century Jew who misrepresented Judaism and whose writings contributed to anti-Semitism over the centuries.\* Jews view him as the founder of

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\* I appreciate Professor Mark Nanos's perspective on Paul that both Jews and Christians have likely misunderstood Paul at points. Nanos is a Jewish Pauline scholar. See his chapter, "A Jewish View," in *Four Views on the Apostle Paul*, ed. Michael F. Bird (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2012).

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Christianity, transforming the life and teachings of Jesus, a rabbi and reformer within Judaism, into a divine redeemer and object of worship. Muslims often see Paul as one who corrupted the teachings of Jesus, trying to turn a man whom they regard as a prophet into the divine Son of God. Many Christians believe that Paul's teaching regarding women—that they were to be submissive to their husbands (Colossians 3:18), that they were not to teach in the church (1 Corinthians 14:34), that they were to “learn in quietness and submission” (1 Timothy 2:11)—contributed to centuries of women's subordination. In passages such as Romans 1:26-28, gay and lesbian people see words that led countless men and women to be treated as shameful for loving persons of the same gender. In centuries past, Paul's words were regularly quoted in support of slavery and God's approval of it.

It is clear in reading the New Testament that even in the first-century church, Paul had his critics. We get hints of Paul's conflicts with Peter and James. Some Jewish followers of Jesus, particularly those called “Judaizers” or the “circumcision party,” vehemently opposed Paul and rejected his teaching that circumcision and obedience to the Law were no longer required of Christ's followers. And of course, for reasons stated above that persist in our time, mainstream Jewish leaders found his teaching offensive and blasphemous.

Christians today will reject some claims of Paul's critics but may recognize truth in others. For example, Christians recognize that Paul offers an interpretation of Jesus' life, death, and resurrection that became normative within Christianity, but we reject the claim that his theologizing about Jesus was a corruption of Jesus' life and teachings. We recognize that Paul's teachings about slaves being obedient to their masters or women being silent in the church have sometimes been used to destructive ends in Christian circles. New Testament scholars of the so-called “new perspectives on Paul” acknowledge that typical interpretations of Paul's writings concerning the Law

and first-century Judaism may not accurately reflect Paul's true views on those subjects.

For me, many of these critiques are mitigated by recognizing that Paul was a man of his times. Paul was shaped by his childhood, his education and experiences, his profound conversion, and his years spent reflecting upon the meaning and implications of Jesus' life, death, and resurrection. The context for his ministry was the Greco-Roman world of the first century. He was educated both in the currents of Greek philosophy and in a specific school of thought that was part of first-century Judaism. His understanding of the gospel was molded by his own faith crises and spiritual experiences. In this, Paul is little different from any of us.

When we read Paul's letters, we see his humanity shining through. He is not simply a mouthpiece of the Holy Spirit; he is a man who has strong convictions, is aware of his critics, and regularly defends himself against them. At times he gets angry and defensive. He has physical ailments and has faced his share of adversity. He is a devout Jew whose thinking is completely immersed in the Greek translation of the Hebrew Scriptures. He is a Roman citizen aware of the events and ethos of the empire. He is familiar with the Greek philosophers and poets. Though a brilliant and skilled orator and philosopher, his theological arguments are sometimes confusing and difficult to grasp. At times he is a pastor seeking to encourage his converts and address their needs; at other times he is a politician trying to navigate among religious parties and between two worlds—the Greco-Roman world and the world of first-century Judaism. Through it all, he seeks to be an apostle and disciple of Jesus Christ, proclaiming the good news as he understands it.

I have a deep appreciation for Paul. His story inspires me. His writings have shaped my life more than any but the Gospels. Though I'm aware of his shortcomings and at times disagree with him, I believe his life, when viewed as a whole, reveals a

heroic figure who sought to exemplify what it means to faithfully follow Jesus Christ. I believe God still speaks through his words, nearly two thousand years after they were written, in order to help us know Christ and live as his followers.

My hope in writing this book is to share Paul's story, hear his message, and reflect on the meaning of his life and message for our own lives and our world today. In preparing to write, I reread Paul's story in Acts several times. I reread Paul's letters in the New Testament. I read a host of books, both scholarly and popular, all listed in the bibliography. I journeyed with my wife and a film crew, retracing Paul's footsteps in Turkey, Greece, and Italy, traveling by plane, car, and boat some fourteen thousand miles, visiting many of the archaeological sites where Paul preached and taught.

This book will follow Paul's life chronologically. Bear in mind that there is some disagreement about when Paul was born, when he was converted, and when his travels took place. Some details of Paul's story in Acts are difficult to reconcile chronologically with what we find in Paul's letters. Precise dates in his life, therefore, are subject to debate.

To bring you along on my travels, in each chapter I'll include photos of places associated with the events described. I visited most of those places, though several were deemed too dangerous to visit at the time we were traveling, due to armed conflicts in the areas. For the places I was unable to visit, photographs were obtained from other sources. If you truly want to travel beside me, a DVD is available for individual or group use in which I take readers to many of the archaeological sites where Paul preached and founded churches.

There are many excellent scholarly books on Paul and many tremendous commentaries on the Acts of the Apostles. At the back of this book, I've listed a number of them that I've read and drawn upon in preparation for this study. My aim in this book, however, is not to write another commentary but rather to draw upon and distill many of the scholars' insights. More than that,

## INTRODUCTION

I hope what sets this book apart is the way I've sought to connect Paul's life and message to the reader's life and faith. Throughout the book I invite the reader to ask, "How does this part of Paul's story speak to my life today?" In the end, my aim is not simply to teach about Paul, but to help modern-day Christians deepen their own faith and answer God's call upon their lives by studying Paul's life, story, and call.

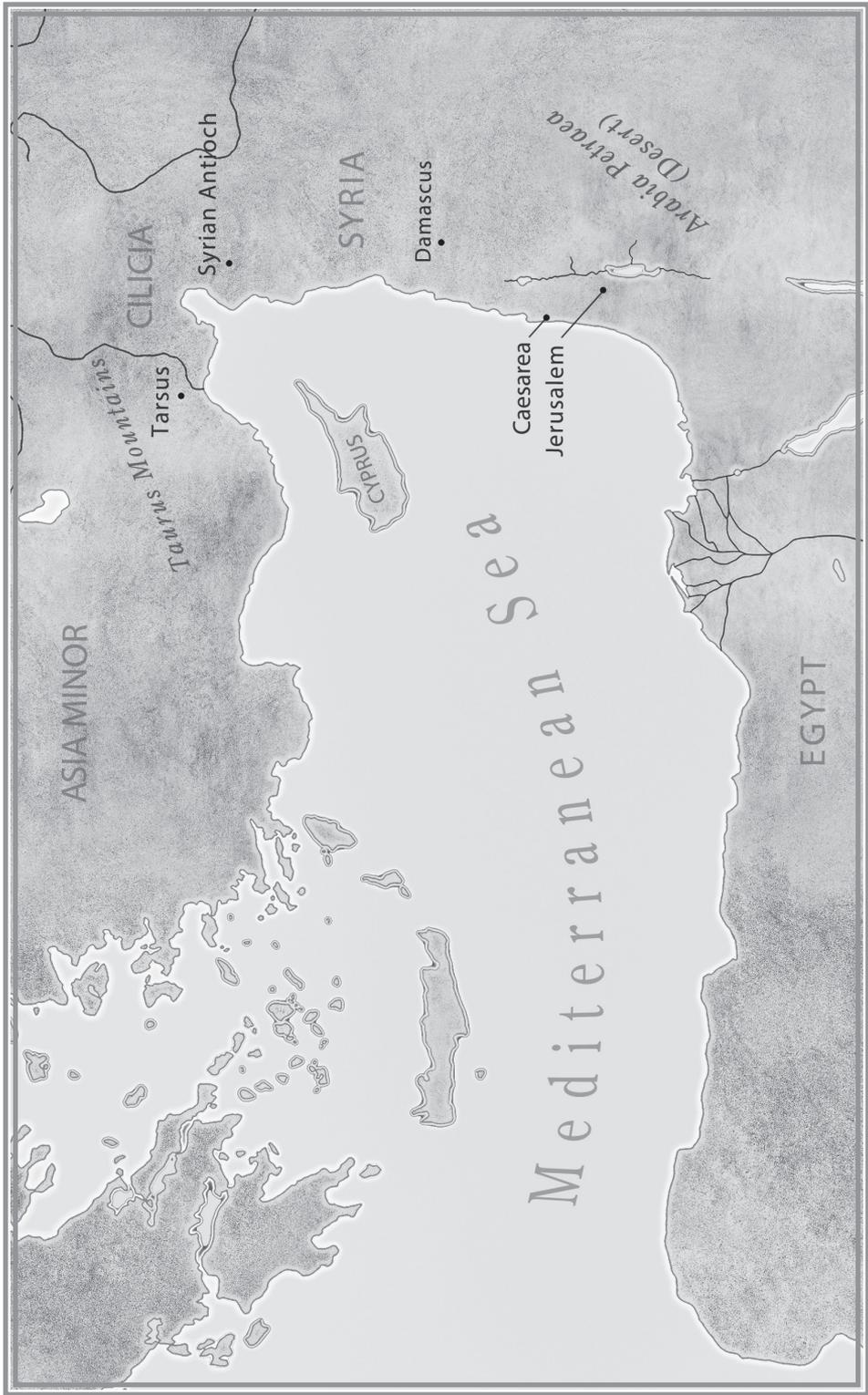


# 1 CALLED TO FOLLOW CHRIST

*PAUL'S BACKGROUND, CONVERSION,  
AND EARLY MINISTRY*

*[And Paul said,] "I am a Jew, born in Tarsus in Cilicia... a citizen of an important city... circumcised on the eighth day, a member of the people of Israel, of the tribe of Benjamin, a Hebrew born of Hebrews... brought up in [Jerusalem] at the feet of Gamaliel, educated strictly according to our ancestral law being zealous for God... I advanced in Judaism beyond many among my people of the same age... I persecuted this Way up to the point of death by binding both men and women and putting them in prison."*

—Acts 22:3a, 21:39b, Philippians 3:5, Acts 22:3b,  
Galatians 1:14a, Acts 22:4



5 B.C. - A.D. 10 Paul is Born (est.)

A.D. 67 Paul's Death

15

A.D. 16-22 Paul begins study in Jerusalem (est.)

20

25

30

A.D. 32 Paul arrests Jesus followers in Palestine (est.)

35

A.D. 35 Paul is converted on road to Damascus (est.)

40

A.D. 35-38 Paul in Arabia, then Damascus

A.D. 38 Paul meets Peter and James in Jerusalem

A.D. 38-48 Paul in Tarsus and region (est.)

45

50

55

60

65

HIS PARENTS NAMED HIM SAUL, after the first king of Israel who, like their child, was of the tribe of Benjamin. His father and mother were part of the Jewish diaspora, living in Tarsus, a major city in the eastern part of the Roman Empire, with what may have been as many as two hundred thousand residents.\*

Tarsus was located ten miles from the Mediterranean Sea on the plateau between the Taurus Mountains and the sea. You could get there by ship traveling up the Cydnus River to a harbor leading into the city. It was a magnificent city, cooled by a sea breeze and nestled at the base of the mountains.

In earlier times, Tarsus had been the capital of the region called Cilicia; by Paul's time, though no longer the capital, Tarsus was still a very important city. Caesar Augustus had granted it special status as a "free city," a way of ensuring the loyalty of its citizens. This was particularly important because Tarsus was located on a key east-west trade route bringing goods from the east to the interior of Asia Minor (modern-day Turkey). This ancient highway passed through the famous Cilician Gates, a mountain pass to the north of Tarsus. As citizens of a free city, the people of Tarsus were permitted to govern themselves, were allowed to mint their own coins, and were free from most Roman taxes.<sup>1</sup> (As you can imagine, avoiding Roman taxes was a tremendous draw, and people were eager to move there.)<sup>†</sup>

There's little left for us to see of Tarsus from Paul's time. Much of the modern city was built atop previous cities that were built atop even earlier cities; hence, the ruins of Paul's Tarsus are mostly buried beneath the present city. Two exceptions include

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\* The estimated population for cities in the Roman Empire during the first century A.D. is difficult to ascertain with certainty. Different sources will offer differing numbers. The ancient ruins of Tarsus are largely buried beneath the modern city, making it even more difficult to estimate. Throughout the book I will use numbers that are derived from multiple sources and will generally go with more conservative estimates. Estimates I've seen for the population of Tarsus in the first century range from one hundred thousand to five hundred thousand people.

† Dio Chrysostom, a younger contemporary of Paul, noted the cost of Tarsian citizenship was five hundred drachma, a drachma being a common laborer's daily wage.



*The Taurus Mountains run along much of the southern coast of Turkey. Paul grew up seeing these mountains and passed through them at some point on each of his missionary journeys.*

a section of Roman road within the city and an old well referred to as St. Paul's Well, which is adjacent to excavated ruins said to be Paul's childhood home. The likelihood of these ruins being Paul's home seems remote to me, but these landmarks give visitors a place to anchor Paul's story.

We learn in the Book of Acts that Paul was born a Roman citizen (22:26), and yet it is estimated that only 10 percent of the empire's population at the time had been granted citizenship, perhaps significantly less in the eastern part of the empire. This leads us to believe that Paul's parents likely were wealthy or important landowners or business owners in Tarsus who themselves had been granted citizenship. It's also likely they were tentmakers or owned a tentmaking business, given that Paul himself was trained as a tentmaker.

Tarsus was an important intellectual center in the Roman Empire. Strabo, a Greek philosopher and geographer who died in A.D. 24, described Tarsus and its citizens this way:

The inhabitants of this city apply to the study of philosophy and to the whole encyclical compass of learning with so much ardour, that they surpass Athens, Alexandria, and every other place which can be named where there are schools and lectures of philosophers.<sup>2</sup>



*The Cilician Gates, a famous mountain pass near Tarsus, was a major trade route and has been enlarged in modern times. Paul would have passed through these “gates” on his second and third missionary journeys.*

It was a place of culture and learning. It is likely that young Saul, whose Roman name was Paul, received instruction at the Greco-Roman primary and grammar schools of Tarsus up to the age of thirteen before being sent to study in Jerusalem. In these schools, Paul would have learned the art of writing and the use of language; he would have studied the Greek poets and the basics of Greek rhetoric and logic.<sup>3</sup> These studies would have played a pivotal role in preparing him at an early age for his later work as an apostle, Christianity’s first theologian, and the man who would be credited with writing thirteen of the New Testament’s twenty-seven books.

Though the practice of having a Bar Mitzvah at age thirteen began later than Paul’s time, it may give some indication of when Jewish young men being prepared for rabbinical studies might have gone to Jerusalem to study. Similarly, the story of Jesus in the temple when he was twelve might point to an age at which boys in Paul’s time were thought to become men and hence ready to learn from the great teachers in Judaism. It seems at least possible, then, that Paul was sent to Jerusalem by his parents sometime around his twelfth or thirteenth birthday, where he

may have studied the Law, both written and oral, under Gamaliel I, one of the leading first-century rabbis, up to the age of twenty. For a first-century Jew, this may have been akin to our practice of going away to college.

Mention of Paul's age raises the question of when he was born, and to that we have no clear answer.\* It is often said he was born sometime between 5 B.C. and A.D. 10. I lean more toward A.D. 10, which would mean that Paul finished his schooling under Gamaliel around A.D. 30, close to the year Jesus was crucified.† This fits nicely with the idea that young Paul was anxious to make a name for himself by persecuting the fledgling Christian movement.

### **How God Uses the Puzzle Pieces of Our Lives**

You may wonder why these details of Paul's early life are important. The reason is that Paul and the things he would later think, write, say, and do were in part the result of his early life experiences. Think of Moses, who grew up in Pharaoh's household and thus was the ideal candidate for God to use in liberating the Israelite slaves from Egypt. In a similar way, Paul's childhood in a predominantly Gentile city known for its culture and outstanding Greco-Roman education, his tentmaking in his father's shop as a boy, his grasp of the Greek language, his Roman citizenship, his education by one of the leading rabbis of his day—all these experiences were critical to the work Paul one day would be called to as Christianity's leading apostle to the Greco-Roman world.

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\* There is great variance in opinion about when Paul was born and how old he was when we first meet him in Acts. Some have suggested he was as old as thirty-five or forty. But recognizing milestones in Jewish education and when Jewish boys were considered to become men, I believe he completed his studies around the age of twenty and persecuted the followers of Jesus shortly after that. In the end, any date given by a scholar will be conjecture.

† We don't know for certain when Jesus was born. It was probably 3 to 5 B.C. The dates of Jesus' birth being several years "before Christ" points to an error in our calendaring system.

## THE CALL

Pause here for a moment and consider your own background—your family of origin, the experiences you had growing up, your education, and religious training. In what ways might God call you to use these things for his purposes?

I was baptized Roman Catholic as an infant, but we did not attend church much when I was small. My father was Catholic, and my mother was a member of the Church of Christ. When they married it was clear my father was not likely to join the Church of Christ, nor my mother the Roman Catholic Church. When I was in third grade, my parents struggled to find a church somewhere between those two, and they settled on the United Methodist Church. My parents eventually divorced, and we dropped out of church. My mom remarried a good man who had serious alcohol problems, so there was constant chaos at our house. My stepdad relocated our family from our childhood home to a southern suburb of Kansas City. It was there that I encountered Christ at a small Pentecostal church, met my future wife, and felt called to be a pastor. Marrying right out of high school, I went off to college at Oral Roberts University, where I received a great education in a charismatic, evangelical tradition. It was while in school at ORU that I felt called to rejoin The United Methodist Church and specifically to take part in revitalizing a church that had been in decline for twenty years by that time. Partly because of that experience, I attended seminary at Southern Methodist University, where I received excellent and somewhat liberal theological training.

Each part of what I've described above is a piece of the puzzle that shaped the person, pastor, and author I am today. I carry a Roman Catholic appreciation for tradition, a Pentecostal and charismatic belief in the power of the Holy Spirit, a compassion based on growing up with an alcoholic stepdad and an often chaotic home life, a willingness to see truth on both the left and the right shaped by my education at an evangelical undergraduate school and a liberal seminary. It is as if God looked at the various pieces of my life and said, "I can use each

of those parts of your past, your life experience, and your faith if you'll let me."

In my experience, the most difficult or painful parts of my past are often the very things that have been the most important elements in whatever success I've had in ministry and in life to the present. In so many ways our lives are like puzzles, and God has a unique way of bringing those various pieces of the puzzle together to create something beautiful and useful in us. What are the puzzle pieces—the life experiences you've had—that God might use to accomplish his redemptive work in the world? God's call on our lives is often surprising and usually is based on God's ability to see how our various elements in the past might fit together to accomplish God's purposes in the present.

### **Saul the Persecutor**

The first time we read about Paul's life in the Acts of the Apostles is in Chapter 7. Jesus had been crucified and resurrected and had ascended to heaven just a couple of years earlier. The fledgling movement of Christ's followers had exploded in Jerusalem. There now were thousands of people who believed that Jesus was in fact the long-awaited Messiah. These Jewish disciples of Jesus called themselves "followers of the Way," and among them, surprisingly, were some of the rabbis from the party of the Pharisees. In Acts 6 one of the leaders of the Way, a man named Stephen, was arrested and placed on trial. When he gave his testimony, the Jewish leaders in Jerusalem convicted him of blasphemy and condemned him to death. In Acts 7 we first hear Paul mentioned in Scripture, though by his Hebrew name:

Then they dragged [Stephen] out of the city and began to stone him; and the witnesses laid their coats at the feet of a young man named Saul....And Saul approved of their killing him. (Acts 7:58-60; 8:1)

## THE CALL

It appears that Paul may have been about twenty years old at the time, which would mean he was quite young to be giving approval for the killing of Stephen.

Death by stoning required that the witness who testified against the convicted individual drop the first stones upon him. The fact that they laid their coats at Paul's feet likely indicates that Paul was given authority to act on behalf of the Jewish leaders to oversee the execution. The Mishnah, or first written version of what was called the Oral Torah, tells us what this process looked like. The victim would be thrown down on his back and held there. Standing over him, about ten feet above the ground on a platform, the first witness took a large stone and dropped it on the victim's chest. If the victim did not die after the first stone, a second was dropped by the second witness. If after the first two witnesses the victim did not die, those around would take rocks and strike him until he died.<sup>4</sup>

We read in Acts that after Stephen's death,

That day a severe persecution began against the church in Jerusalem, and all except the apostles were scattered throughout the countryside of Judea and Samaria.... Saul was ravaging the church by entering house after house; dragging off both men and women, he committed them to prison.... Saul, still breathing threats and murder against the disciples of the Lord, went to the high priest and asked him for letters to the synagogues at Damascus, so that if he found any who belonged to the Way, men or women, he might bring them bound to Jerusalem. (Acts 8:1, 3; 9:1-2)

What was it that motivated Paul to volunteer for the job of approving Stephen's execution and then going from house to house to arrest followers of the Way? I think it may have been the same thing that caused him years later to write, "I advanced in Judaism beyond many among my people of the same age, for I was far more zealous for the traditions of my ancestors" (Galatians 1:14). Early in his career Paul was eager to impress

the Jewish ruling council in Jerusalem and to make a name for himself. In other words, it was Paul's personal ambition, combined with his unwavering religious convictions, that I believe led him to the work of persecuting the fledgling Christian movement.

Thinking about ambition, let's consider once more how Paul's story might connect with your story or with the stories of people you may know. Many of us struggle with ambition. I have struggled with it my whole life. I remember praying years ago, "Lord, please take away my ambition." And I felt him saying to me, "I'm not going to take it away; I'm going to use it, but your ambition must be for me and not for you."

Some people are blinded by ambition and are willing at times to do horrible things in order to get ahead. Paul was convinced that followers of the Way, regardless of how devout or gentle or loving, had to be stopped. It wasn't God that drove him to arrest those followers and approve their deaths. Blind ambition and unwavering religious conviction can be a dangerous combination.

It's important for us to submit our ambition to God, directing it to his glory and not our own, and for the most part that's what Paul seems to have done for the rest of his life. We can avoid acts that are contrary to our faith, as Paul learned to do, by holding our religious convictions with humility and never forgetting the commands of loving God and neighbor. To help me with that task, I memorized Scripture—like Psalm 115:1, which I often repeat as a "breath prayer," (the kind of prayer you can say in one breath): "Not to us, O LORD, not to us, but to your name give glory." I committed to memory Jesus' question in Matthew 16:26, "What good will it be for someone to gain the whole world, yet forfeit their soul?" (NIV).

When we fail to surrender our ambition to God's purposes, when we live to seek our glory and are willing to do whatever it takes to get ahead, we are bound to fall. But if we succeed in surrendering our ambition to God's purposes, we will help

others find their way on the path of life. That's exactly what Paul was about to do.

### **It Is Hard to Kick Against the Goads**

Paul, with letters in hand from the high priest authorizing the arrest of followers of the Way, began his way to Damascus. While on the road, he was stopped in his tracks, and his life was changed forever. Here is how he described the experience:

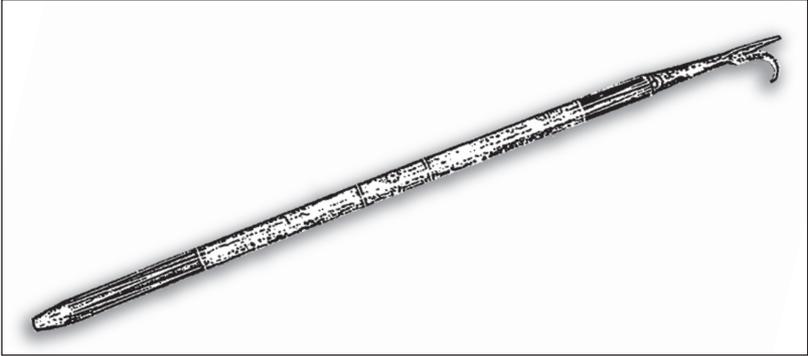
I was traveling to Damascus with the authority and commission of the chief priests, when at midday along the road . . . I saw a light from heaven, brighter than the sun, shining around me and my companions. When we had all fallen to the ground, I heard a voice saying to me in the Hebrew language, "Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting me? It hurts you to kick against the goads." I asked, "Who are you, Lord?" The Lord answered, "I am Jesus whom you are persecuting."

(Acts 26:12-15)

Some have suggested the light from heaven was a bolt of lightning that struck near Paul and his colleagues. Whatever happened, it was terrifying, and Paul was blinded by it. In the midst of the light, Paul heard Jesus speaking to him. I love what Jesus said: "Saul, Saul . . . it hurts you to kick against the goads."

What on earth is a goad? A goad is a stick with a pointed end, used to prod oxen and cattle to move in the direction their owner wants them to go. Jesus was saying, in effect, that he had been prodding or "goading" Paul in the right direction for some time, that Paul had not paid attention, and that his failure to pay attention was hurting Paul and others. ("It hurts you to kick against the goads.")

What an interesting idea: God is prodding us on a regular basis, seeking to lead us, guide us, and move us to do his will and to live as his people. God's prod is gentle yet persistent. And yet, unlike the old farmer who goads his oxen so hard they can't help but obey, God allows us to resist his goading.



*A goad is a stick with a sharp point at the end, and sometimes a hook, used to prod animals.*

Pastor Dave Wilkinson wrote about this goading work of God. He and his wife were on a plane, sitting next to a young man who asked, “So, what do you do?” Wilkinson told him, “I’m a minister.” The young man nearly jumped out of his seat and then said, “Every time I sit next to someone, he turns out to be a Christian. I can’t escape. I know that God is after me.” Wilkinson told him that he was probably right and “the only smart thing to do in such a situation is to surrender.”<sup>5</sup>

I wonder if you’ve felt God’s nudges, pokes, and proddings. Are you being goaded by God? Are you paying attention? Or, like Dave Wilkinson and his wife, are you being called by God to be a gentle nudge, a reminder to someone else, that God is chasing after him?

### **The Importance of Ananias**

Paul, temporarily blinded, was led by his fellow travelers to Damascus. This lion of a man, who had breathed murderous threats against the church of Jesus, now was led, terrified, to a home on Straight Street. If you visit Damascus today, you can go to the old city and see Straight Street, marked at one end by a triumphal Roman arch.



*Roman arch at Straight Street*

Paul sat there for three days, unable to see, his physical blindness a way of helping him see his previous spiritual blindness. He was unwilling to eat or drink. God was working on him in the silence as he came face to face with a disturbing fact: his desire to serve God had been distorted by his own ambition, which had led him to persecute God’s people.

Meanwhile, God was prodding someone else, a man named Ananias, who was a follower of Christ and someone whom Paul likely had come to arrest. Christ spoke to Ananias in a vision. We aren’t told the precise nature of this prod—perhaps it was a dream, an idea, a strong urging from within, a still small voice.

The Lord said to him, “Get up and go to the street called Straight, and at the house of Judas look for a man of Tarsus named Saul.”...But Ananias answered, “Lord, I have heard from many about this man, how much evil he has done to your saints.” (Acts 9:11, 13)

## CALLED TO FOLLOW CHRIST

Christ told Ananias to find the house where Paul was staying, then to pray for Paul so that he might see again. Understandably, Ananias was afraid and objected, but the voice of Christ persisted, so finally Ananias went. Imagine the courage it must have taken for Ananias to confront Paul the inquisitor.

Ananias went and entered the house. He laid his hands on Saul and said, “Brother Saul, the Lord Jesus, who appeared to you on your way here, has sent me so that you may regain your sight and be filled with the Holy Spirit.” And immediately something like scales fell from his eyes, and his sight was restored. Then he got up and was baptized. (Acts 9:17-18)

Today in Damascus, Paul’s baptism is remembered in a small church said to be built on the site of Ananias’s home. The house sits fifteen feet below ground level, where the street would have been located 1,900 years ago.

Notice that Paul’s conversion was a result both of his experience of Christ and of Ananias sharing with him. This is how it often works. Most of us don’t have a Damascus Road blinding-light conversion, but we do experience Christ in some way: we feel him speaking to us, we sense his love, we feel



*Ananias's House Chapel in Damascus. Tradition says that this chapel was built atop the home of Ananias.*

moved to say yes. But we also have our Ananiases who come alongside to offer us Christ.

We never again hear about Ananias in the Bible. He courageously stepped up, went to Paul, and shared Christ with him, and as a result the world was changed.

As for Paul, he learned that conversion happens to us when we stop pursuing our own blind ambition, when we recognize God's prodding in our lives, and when we finally surrender to God's will. That's where the real adventure begins. It certainly began there for Paul.

### **Beginning to Preach**

It is impossible to overstate the impact that Paul's Damascus Road experience, along with his subsequent conversion and baptism, had on the young rabbi known as Saul. He was perhaps twenty-five years old at the time. He had had the finest of Greek and Jewish educations. He was on the fast track to becoming a real "somebody" in Judaism. Did he and his parents dare to dream that one day he might be the first Tarsian Jew to become part of the Sanhedrin, the Jewish ruling council?

In a moment, everything he had believed, all his ambitions and dreams, and all his life's work and preparation were upended by a flash of light and a voice. With the courageous help of Ananias, a disciple of Jesus in Damascus, Paul embraced the One whose voice he had heard. Paul began to eat, he was baptized, and his eyes were opened, literally and spiritually. And he began to preach. Here's what happened next:

For several days he was with the disciples in Damascus, and immediately he began to proclaim Jesus in the synagogues, saying, "He is the Son of God." All who heard him were amazed and said, "Is not this the man who made havoc in Jerusalem among those who invoked this name? And has he not come here for the purpose of bringing them bound before the chief priests?" Saul became increasingly more powerful

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and confounded the Jews who lived in Damascus by proving that Jesus was the Messiah. (Acts 9:19b-22)

What a radical shift, from persecutor of the Way to its most powerful advocate! It was precisely this radical conversion that made Saul such a compelling witness. My own experience in speaking with atheists and agnostics is that it is impossible to reason and argue most people to faith. In the end, the most compelling case I can make for faith is my experiences of God's presence and how faith in Christ has made me a different person. I can point to hundreds of other people who once were addicts or self-centered narcissists or driven materialists or lying and cheating spouses whose lives have been changed in dramatic and positive ways by their trust in Christ.

Paul's education allowed him to offer a compelling and powerful case from Scripture for why Jesus was in fact the Christ, but it likely was his experience of Christ and his conversion that could not be argued away. He once was blind, but now he saw. He once persecuted the Way, but he had been seized by Christ on the road to Damascus, had been baptized, and now was willing to die for his faith. Early in his ministry, that willingness nearly was tested.

After some time had passed, the Jews plotted to kill him, but their plot became known to Saul. They were watching the gates day and night so that they might kill him; but his disciples took him by night and let him down through an opening in the wall, lowering him in a basket. (Acts 9:23-25)

He who had persecuted the followers of the Way was now himself persecuted.

### **A Side Note About “the Jews”**

I want to pause here for an important side note about terminology that was used by Luke, the author of Acts. Throughout the Book of Acts, Luke refers to those who opposed

the gospel and sought to suppress Christianity as “the Jews.” The phrase appears at least forty-four times in Acts, almost always negatively. John’s Gospel uses the same term for those who opposed Jesus, with the phrase appearing at least sixty times in his Gospel. Unfortunately, use of the term would contribute to an anti-Semitism that reared its head throughout church history. “The Jews” became the killers of Christ and the persecutors of the church. Lost was the fact that Jesus was a Jew, the disciples were Jews, Paul was a Jew, and nearly all the thousands of Christ’s followers at the time of Paul’s conversion were Jews.

Had Luke and John known the impact their language would have and the anti-Semitism it would foster, I believe they would have chosen a different term. They were not referring to all Jews, nor even to most Jews, but to a small number of Jewish leaders who actively sought to suppress Jesus’ message (in John) or the early church (in Acts). Some scholars believe that use of the phrase may have been a sign of strained relations between normative Judaism and the church during the time when Acts and John were written—Acts and John likely both being written in the 80s, when in some communities Jewish Christians were no longer welcome in the synagogue.

If you’re not Jewish, use of this phrase may seem a small thing, but I believe it is important to note. Imagine if every act of anti-Semitism committed by someone claiming to be a Christian was attributed to “the Christians,” or every hateful anti-gay sign was attributed to “the Christians.” If we imagine this language ultimately leading to a broader persecution of all Christians, maybe we can begin to understand the negative impact this kind of generalizing language can have.<sup>6</sup>

### **Paul’s Sojourn in Arabia and Back in Damascus**

Paul reports in Galatians 1:17 that after escaping Damascus, “I went away at once into Arabia, and afterwards I returned

to Damascus.” Here Arabia refers to an area also known as Arabia Petraea—that is, the desert kingdom whose capital was Petra and whose territory included the Sinai Peninsula to the south, modern-day Jordan, and the desert regions in the east of modern-day Lebanon and Syria. In this region there were oasis cities, but much of the kingdom was in biblical terms the “wilderness.”



*The city of Petra in Jordan, whose buildings were carved out of the cliffs, may have been visited by Paul during his desert sojourn.*

Moses and Elijah sojourned for a time in the wilderness, as did John the Baptist. Jesus spent forty days in prayer there. In much the same way, Paul fled Damascus for the wilderness. In Galatians he reports that he spent a total of three years in Arabia and back in Damascus, so we can't be sure how long he spent in the wilderness, nor what he was doing, but we might speculate. It may well be that the three-year period was spent reflecting upon the meaning of what had just happened to him.

My own belief is that Paul spent the three years beginning to work out his theology. The Benedictine monk and philosopher

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St. Anselm (1033–1109) said the task of theology was “faith seeking understanding.” I believe that is precisely what Paul was working out. He had had a profound, life-changing experience. He had encountered the risen Christ. But what were the implications of his encounter? How was he to make sense of his experience in the light of everything he knew about the Torah and the prophets? For three years (interestingly, the same period of time the disciples were said to have spent with Jesus—and the length of the typical Master of Divinity program in American theological seminaries), Paul spent time alone in prayer, studying the Scriptures, and seeking to work out the meaning of Jesus’ life, death, and resurrection for humanity, with implications for both Jews and Gentiles.

The great theological themes of Paul’s preaching and letters were not taught to him by someone else but, according to Paul himself, received by revelation from Christ. This revelation did not happen in just that one encounter on the Damascus Road; it took place over a period of time as Paul prayed, studied, and sought God.

For I want you to know, brothers and sisters, that the gospel that was proclaimed by me is not of human origin; for I did not receive it from a human source, nor was I taught it, but I received it through a revelation of Jesus Christ.

(Galatians 1:11-12)

Some have suggested that Paul spent the three years preaching and starting churches in Arabia, in what would have been his first foray as a missionary. This is possible, and perhaps it’s likely that he did so at some point. But Luke doesn’t mention it, and neither does Paul. Instead, the implication in these biblical texts is that Paul devoted time to study, prayer, and making sense of Jesus as the long-awaited Messiah, one who was crucified, dead, and buried, yet rose on the third day, conquering evil, hate, sin, and death. Paul had to rethink everything he had been

taught about the Messiah, about the Law, about righteousness, and much more. I believe much of Paul's theology was worked out during this three-year "silent" period of his life, when he was in his late twenties.

The three-year silent period reminds me that we all must have times of silence and solitude for study, prayer, reflection, and listening for God's voice. For me this happens in reading Scripture and thoughtful books on faith. It happens in long walks when I seek to carry on conversations with Christ. It happens when I'm listening to the preaching of others and when I'm preparing my own sermons. It happens in times of personal retreat. It was part of the reason I traveled to Turkey, Greece, and Italy to retrace Paul's steps

All of us need silent times away to seek understanding, to have a flash of insight, or to hear the whisper of God's Spirit. Without those times, I find that my prayer life becomes anemic and I rarely listen for God to speak. I quickly hurry through my morning devotions because the clock is ticking and I've got work to do.

When was the last time you took time away from the busyness of your life for solitude, reading, prayer, and reflection? I find that such times refresh my soul and bring new visions and dreams that fill my heart. The times when God seems most distant to me, when I feel most spiritually empty, are when I haven't taken adequate time for spiritual retreat, reading, and prayer.

### **Paul and Peter: An Uncomfortable Relationship?**

Paul reports in Galatians that after three years, "I did go up to Jerusalem to visit Cephas (Peter) and stayed with him fifteen days" (Galatians 1:18-19). In Acts 9, Luke seems to be describing this same time in Paul's life.

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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. But Barnabas took him, brought him to the apostles, and described for them how on the road he had seen the Lord, who had spoken to him, and how in Damascus he had spoken boldly in the name of Jesus.

(Acts 9:26-27)

Prior to his conversion, Paul had given approval for the stoning of Stephen and was “breathing threats and murder against the disciples of the Lord.” It is no wonder that, even though they had received word three years earlier that Paul had come to faith, the disciples were suspicious and less than welcoming of Paul. It was Barnabas, of whom we’ll speak more in a moment, who opened the door for Paul to meet with Peter, and not only to meet with him but also to stay in his home for fifteen days.

How I would love to have been a fly on the wall during Paul’s fifteen days with Peter! Peter was an uneducated fisherman who knew Jesus personally and was one of his closest associates. Peter had three years’ worth of firsthand stories about Jesus’ life and teachings and his death and resurrection. Paul was highly educated both in the Scriptures and in Greek thought, and he had spent three years reflecting on the significance of Jesus in the light of that education. Yet he had never met the Jesus who walked on this earth in the flesh. Both Peter and Paul had important pieces of the gospel from which the other could benefit.

It is interesting to note that Paul, in his preaching and letters, devoted very little time to telling stories about Jesus’ life. He offered very few direct quotes from Jesus’ teachings (though he did make a few allusions to things Jesus said). It may be that Paul assumed these things were known by word-of-mouth to his hearers and readers (word-of-mouth because the earliest Gospels as we have them were likely not written

until after the death of Paul). How grateful we should be that, in God's providence, we have both the Gospel accounts and the letters of Paul, each of which complements the other. The Gospel accounts describe events from the life of Jesus and the Lord's teachings, whereas Paul's focus is on the significance of Jesus' life and message, with a particular focus on the meaning of Jesus' death and resurrection.

It's easy to imagine that because of their differing perspectives, there was tension between these, Paul and Peter. My guess is that both were "alpha males." If Paul were, as I've suggested, ten to fifteen years Peter's junior, Paul might have felt a bit insecure around Peter. Paul's letter to the Galatians reveals this tension in two passages. In the first passage, Paul referred to the leaders of the Jerusalem church in this way: "Those who were supposed to be acknowledged leaders (what they actually were makes no difference to me; God shows no partiality)—those leaders contributed nothing to me" (2:6). In the second passage, Paul issued a public rebuke of Peter (Cephas) when Peter visited Syrian Antioch, saying "I opposed him to his face" (2:11). Whether or not Paul was in the right concerning Peter's error, the public rebuke seemed to lack the respect that should have been afforded to Jesus' lead apostle, and I think it may have been influenced by a feeling of jealousy or insecurity on Paul's part.

I am grateful that Paul included passages such as these in his letter to the Galatians. The passages demonstrate Paul's humanity—a man deeply devoted to God, courageously proclaiming the gospel, and yet imperfect like all of us, influenced by insecurities and occasionally acting in ways that do not reflect grace. I realize that some readers may feel uncomfortable when I suggest that Paul may have lacked tact or may have spoken out of insecurity. Who am I to judge Paul? Paul was an amazing man, a giant of a man—but he was still a man, and by his own words he seems at times to have lacked grace. Paul's flaws make me appreciate him even more, not simply as a mouthpiece for God

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but as a real man who was, like all of us, on the journey toward sanctification.

Whatever disagreements may have existed between Paul and Peter, the fact remains that on Paul's first visit to Jerusalem in three years, he spent fifteen days in Peter's home. Acts tells us that during Paul's visit,

He went in and out among them in Jerusalem, speaking boldly in the name of the Lord. He spoke and argued with the Hellenists; but they were attempting to kill him. When the believers learned of it, they brought him down to Caesarea and sent him off to Tarsus. (Acts 9:28-30)

### **The In-Between Time**

Barnabas and the other believers put Paul on a boat to Tarsus; he was moving back home in his late twenties. The son who was destined for greatness, who was educated in the finest schools in Tarsus and Jerusalem, likely moved back into his parent's house. How many young adults today can relate to this story? Paul's return must have caused confusion and disappointment for his parents, and possibly for Paul. We don't know how long he lived there. In Galatians 2:1, he notes that "after fourteen years I went up again to Jerusalem," but there is some confusion as to when the fourteen years started and whether or not it included Paul's first missionary journey. At the very least it appears that Paul lived in Tarsus for upwards of ten years after his conversion.

During that time, Paul likely used Tarsus as his home base, preaching and teaching at synagogues and fledgling churches in the regions of Cilicia and Syria, in what today is southeast Turkey. Note, however, that Paul had been told by the Lord at his conversion that he had an important mission to fulfill, and yet for at least ten years Paul lived in Tarsus, likely in his parents' home as he made tents in his father's business.



*Paul's Well, Tarsus. Though Paul may never have drawn water from the well that bears his name, it is a physical reminder that Tarsus was Paul's hometown.*

While living at home, Paul certainly must have continued to contemplate the meaning of the gospel. He undoubtedly grew in wisdom, which included both head and heart knowledge gained through lived experience. I've found that often the greatest wisdom-building experiences are those that come in the midst of disappointment, adversity, and waiting. Our faith often grows deeper, though we may not recognize it at the time. We don't know if Paul was experiencing a "dark night of the soul" during these ten years, but surely he wondered what had happened to the dramatic call he had heard from Ananias: "You will be [God's] witness to all the world of what you have seen and heard" (Acts 22:15).

It is interesting to note how often in Scripture there is a delay between the moment of God's call or an experience of God's presence or a vision that seems to come from God about the future and when these things actually come to pass. Consider Abraham, who was told in Genesis 12 that God would make him "a great nation," and in Genesis 22 that his descendants would be "as numerous as the stars of heaven." Abraham was seventy-five when he first heard God's call and promises. But it was

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nine chapters later, when Abraham was one hundred years old that Isaac was finally born. There were some challenging years in those nine chapters. The twenty-five years between the vision and fulfillment were the “in-between” time for Abraham and Sarah.

Consider Joseph, Abraham’s great-grandson, who at the age of seventeen had visions of greatness he could not understand and did not handle well. It was only after being sold as a slave and later being cast into prison that Joseph finally became Pharaoh’s right-hand man at the age of thirty, and it was another seven years before he was vindicated and the visions he had had at seventeen finally were fulfilled, at age thirty-seven. Those twenty years were the “in-between” time for Joseph.

Moses, after fleeing Pharaoh’s palace, spent forty years in the Sinai tending goats before God finally called him back to demand the release of the Israelite slaves. David was anointed by Samuel to be the next king of Israel, but he went through twenty-five years and a whole lot of trouble before he finally assumed the throne. And consider Jesus, who at the age of twelve knew he had a unique relationship with God, but there would be eighteen years of waiting before he was baptized and began his three-year public ministry.

Was God at work during Abraham’s twenty-five years of waiting? Or Joseph’s twenty years? Were Moses’ forty years in the wilderness wasted? Or David’s twenty-five years, much of it spent avoiding King Saul’s efforts to kill him? And what of Jesus? Was his Father at work in Jesus’ life during those eighteen years when he labored alongside his earthly father?

In Paul’s case, he spent ten years wondering what Ananias could possibly have meant and why he still was making tents when there was a big world out there to be saved. Perhaps his sense of calling began to fade during that time. But God was at work during the “in-between” time.

How often this pattern has persisted for those whom God uses to change the world. I think of John Wesley, who spent most

of his twenties and thirties striving to do God's will but often feeling like a failure. Finally, after his greatest disappointment, God unleashed him to lead a revival across Great Britain that would leap across a continent and change the world.

Have you ever experienced an "in-between time"? Perhaps you are experiencing one now. God is at work, trust that! Keep putting one foot in front of the other! Moses, David, Jesus, Paul, Wesley, and many others did not stop dreaming, thinking, and working as they waited, and in the waiting God was preparing them, transforming them, and readying them for what lay in store.

### **The Gospel Unleashed in Syrian Antioch**

In Acts 11, Luke takes us to Antioch in Syria, also known as Antioch on the Orontes River. (There were at least sixteen cities named Antioch in Asia Minor and Syria, two of which play an important role in Paul's story.) Syrian Antioch, known as the Crown of the Orient, was the third-largest city in the Roman Empire during Paul's time, with as many two hundred fifty thousand residents.\*

Today the city is part of southeastern Turkey, twelve miles from the Syrian border, but in biblical times it was part of the Roman province of Syria. Most of the ruins from the time of Paul have yet to be excavated, but one site dates back at least to the 300s, with tradition dating the Cave Church of St. Peter to the time of Paul. According to that tradition, on a visit to Antioch, Peter found a cave or perhaps helped to carve one, where the first Christian community began to meet. The façade of the church dates to the 1800s, but the earliest portions of the building may date back to the 300s if not before.

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\* Just a reminder that population numbers are estimates and vary greatly depending upon the source.

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*This is the exterior and interior of the Cave Church of St. Peter in Syrian Antioch. Tradition says that Peter expanded the grotto so that the church at Antioch might meet there.*

The ancient city of Syrian Antioch, located about three hundred fifty miles north of Jerusalem, was home to a relatively large Jewish population, and there were many Gentiles (non-Jews) who put their faith in God and sought to honor him by participating at the synagogues. Luke refers to these Gentiles as “God-fearers.”

Apparently some of the followers of the Way had taken the gospel to Antioch, and Luke tells us that a “great number” of Jews and God-fearing Gentiles were becoming followers of Jesus. Luke reports in Acts 11:22 that “news of this came to the ears of the church in Jerusalem, and they sent Barnabas to Antioch.”

This major metropolis, within the decade, would likely see the Christian community grow so rapidly that it became bigger than the church in Jerusalem, perhaps even than all the churches in the Holy Land. Antioch quickly became an important center of Christianity, and Luke tells us, it was here that the followers of Jesus first were called Christians.

## **Who Is Your Barnabas? Whose Barnabas Are You?**

Before we conclude this chapter on Paul's conversion and early ministry, let's turn our attention to Barnabas, a man who would play a pivotal role in Paul's early ministry. We first read of Barnabas in Acts 4:36-37.

There was a Levite, a native of Cyprus, Joseph, to whom the apostles gave the name Barnabas (which means "son of encouragement"). He sold a field that belonged to him, then brought the money, and laid it at the apostles' feet.

We learn a number of useful things in this short passage. We learn that Barnabas's given name was Joseph. We learn that, like Paul, he was a Jew of the Diaspora (a Jew who lived outside the Holy Land), from the island of Cyprus. We learn that he was a Levite. Levites, from the Israelite tribe of Levi, were assigned different roles during the history of Israel, but all were linked in some way to the priesthood, to the Tabernacle and later the Temple, and to the religious laws. Some Levites were priests. Some were musicians. Some were teachers, judges, even accountants. Levites maintained the Temple and the holy things of God. In the Diaspora, Levites were called upon to assist or read Scripture in the synagogue, a practice that is still observed in some synagogues today.

Barnabas appears to have been a devout Jew who had come to faith in Christ while in Jerusalem, quite possibly having heard Jesus speak or having been a witness to the Resurrection. Perhaps he was among the three thousand who came to faith on the day of Pentecost in response to Peter's preaching and the outpouring of the Holy Spirit.

We also learn in the passage from Acts 4 that Barnabas sold a field he owned and gave the proceeds to the apostles to be used to support their work and the needs of the believers in

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Jerusalem.\* He clearly was an extravagant giver. Jesus once said, “Where your treasure is, there your heart will be also” (Matthew 6:21). My experience with members of my congregation is that when people make a large gift such as this, it indicates the depth of their faith and commitment, or at the very least the act of giving deepens their faith and commitment.

Finally, we learn that the apostles gave him the name Barnabas, which Luke tells us means “son of encouragement,” a magnificent name that undoubtedly described his character. We see his character, his habitual efforts at encouraging others, in Barnabas’s interaction with Paul. In Acts 9:27, as we’ve already seen, Barnabas was the one leader in the Jerusalem church willing to take a chance on Paul when all others were afraid of him. Barnabas vouched for Paul and brought him to Peter and James. With Barnabas’s vouching for him, the other disciples were willing to take a chance on Paul.

Now let’s return to Antioch. At least ten years had passed since Barnabas had put Paul on a ship from Jerusalem to Tarsus in order to save Paul from those who wanted to kill him. Now, Barnabas had been sent by the apostles to see what the Spirit was doing among the new believers in Antioch. Luke reports:

When [Barnabas] came and saw the grace of God, he rejoiced, and he exhorted them all to remain faithful to the Lord with steadfast devotion; for he was a good man, full of the Holy Spirit and of faith. (Acts 11:23-24)

I love this passage, both for the way Barnabas exhorted the new believers in Antioch and, particularly, for the words Luke uses to describe Barnabas: “He was a good man, full of the Holy Spirit and of faith.” Would that each of us could be described

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\* There is some debate about whether Levites were forbidden from owning any real property by the Torah or whether they simply were not given a portion of the land as their inheritance during the conquest of Canaan and instead relied upon the tithes of the people. In any event, it appears from this text that some Levites in the New Testament period did own land.

by those words! In that one line there's a three-point sermon waiting to be proclaimed. There's a focus for an entire year's worth of prayers: "O Lord, make me like Barnabas, generous, an encourager, a good person. Fill me with your Holy Spirit, and with the gift of faith."

Luke goes on to tell us that Barnabas remained in Antioch leading the church, and "a great many people were brought to the Lord" (v. 24). In just these few short passages, Luke has painted a vivid picture for us of the kind of Christian Barnabas was—and the kind of Christian we might each seek to be—one who leads others to faith; the kind of leader who helps churches transform their communities, who shows kindness, who has a deep faith, who is led by and filled with the Holy Spirit.

As Barnabas saw what was happening among the Gentiles and Jews in the huge metropolis of Antioch, the New York City of the eastern Roman Empire, he remembered the educated and passionate young Pharisee he put on a boat for Tarsus some ten years earlier. Who do you think brought this thought to Barnabas's mind? My guess is the Holy Spirit. For many of us, when we have such thoughts we tend to dismiss them or fail to pay attention. But if, like Barnabas, we listen and pay attention, the Spirit can bring things to our minds that we've long forgotten. Luke tells us how Barnabas responded.

Then Barnabas went to Tarsus to look for Saul, and when he had found him, he brought him to Antioch. So it was that for an entire year they met with the church and taught a great many people. (Acts 11:25-26)

Barnabas went on, as we will see in the next chapter, to travel with Paul on his first missionary journey. It is clear that at the start of the trip Barnabas was the more prominent of the two: Luke regularly refers to them as Barnabas and Saul. But at some point during that first missionary journey, Luke starts referring to them as Paul and Barnabas. Paul's star had risen; from that

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time on he received first billing. Barnabas seemed fine with this. In fact, I suspect he delighted in the fact that his protégé was coming into his own.

The last time we read about Barnabas is in Acts 15, when Paul and Barnabas had a disagreement and parted ways, something we'll discuss in a subsequent chapter. It's clear, though, that without Barnabas, Paul might have lived out his days making tents in Tarsus. It was Barnabas who believed in Paul when he first came to Jerusalem. It was Barnabas who introduced him to the apostles. It was Barnabas who found him during the in-between years and brought him to Antioch.

Barnabas never wrote a book of the Bible (though some have suggested he may have written the Letter to the Hebrews), but much of our New Testament would not exist without the encouragement he gave to Paul.

I wonder, do you have someone to encourage you? Do you have a Barnabas? Mine was a man named Bob Robertson. It was 1985. I had just graduated from college in Tulsa and had applied for a job as youth director at a United Methodist church in Dallas, since I was heading there to begin seminary in the fall at Southern Methodist University. I drove four hours to get to the interview, and when I arrived the church secretary told me, "Oh, our pastor decided to hire someone else. I'm sorry we forgot to let you know."

I had given up two days and spent what little cash I had on gas and a place to stay overnight. I left the church that day so very discouraged. I drove to the district office of The United Methodist Church and stopped to see if anyone there knew of any job openings. The secretary said, "I know someone who's looking for a youth director. His name is Bob Robertson." She called Bob, who invited me over. I drove to meet Bob at the church he was pastoring, New World United Methodist Church in Garland, Texas. On the spot he offered me a job. He saw something in me. Over the next three years he mentored me, encouraged me, and helped me believe in myself.

After I graduated from seminary, Bob regularly called or sent me notes of encouragement. He continued to believe in me and saw things in me I did not see in myself. I continue to thank God for the impact Bob had on my life, and I still wear a stole Bob's wife gave me after his death in 2002, one that reminds me of him and the role he played in my life.

One of the young people in my congregation collapsed at a football game because of a brain injury incurred on the field. He was comatose when I went to see him in the intensive care unit of the hospital, and his parents were not sure he would survive. When I stepped into the waiting room, I found his parents surrounded by friends, family, and fellow church members. We went to pray at their son's bedside in ICU. They said to me, "Pastor Adam, what has sustained us through this is the number of people who have come alongside us to encourage us. We could not have made it this far without them." As I write these words, their son is in rehab, steadily making progress toward recovery.

The young man and his parents needed encouragers. So do all of us. It's easy to be an encourager, and there's joy in it. Our task is to pay attention, looking for those who need our encouragement. That's what Barnabas did, and I can't help but wonder what would have happened to Saul of Tarsus without him.

All of us need a Barnabas. But it's important for us to remember that all of us are called to be someone else's Barnabas too. Part of our mission in life is to encourage others and to see in them what they may not see in themselves.

Who is your Barnabas? More importantly, whose Barnabas will you be?