

A Grace Gathering

Lesson #1

3 September 2023

**The Life and Ministry of Saul (Paul) of Tarsus:
The Apostle of Grace**

When God has a task to be accomplished, He calls and enables people to do it, sometimes in shocking ways. I think in a way that is the story of all our lives; God shapes and molds our circumstances in the womb and from it through numerous experiences (Ps. 139:13-14, "... you wove me in my mother's womb...I am awesomely and wonderfully made;" Jer. 1:5, "Before I formed you in your mother's womb, I knew you and before you were born, I consecrated you..."), some good and others devastating. His purpose is to shape each of us to honor and serve Him in a particular manner that no one else can (He gives us eye to see what others do not, ear too hear what others do not, and the circumstances that are a meaning for us to reach out). It is not about any uniqueness that we might have that he shapes us; it is that he was to use us incomprehensively for His glory. The service that one is called to by God is neither inferior nor superior to another; it is all about grace. God puts us where he puts us; it is not about us, only our response to Him. It is about grace on His part and obedience to accept His will as ours.

I want to begin a short series looking at the life of one man, who in a way is a cameo of our own experiences (the unexpected, the uncertain, the foolish, the struggle, the blessing), the Apostle Paul. None of us could reach the apex of ministry that He sustain, but it is never about the man; it is about the God who raised Him up. While he is not the most prolific writer (of the New Testament corpus if judge by words on the page), yet He gave us thirteen of the twenty-seven books. Scattered throughout his letters as well as Luke's rendering of early Christianity (Acts), we have much biographical material (more so by far than any other New Testament writer).



1. **The beginning: Tarsus (ca. 5-15 AD)**
“Then Paul said: ³“I am a Jew, born in Tarsus of Cilicia, but brought up in this city (Acts 22:3).”

“Then the commander said, “I had to pay a big price for my citizenship.”
“But I was born a citizen,” Paul replied (Acts 22:28)

“If anyone else thinks he has reasons to put confidence in the flesh, I have more: ⁵circumcised on the eighth day of the people of Israel, of the tribe of Benjamin, a Hebrew of Hebrews (Phil. 3:3-4).”

(Cilicia was a Roman province in what is southeastern Turkey (incorporated into the empire in 67 when the area was conquered by Pompey. Tarsus, the capitol of province, was a cosmopolitan city on a major East-West trade. It was known as a center of education, boasting a major academy, as well a major access to the Mediterranean.)

What can we learn:

- a. Paul was a Jew, a Hebrew.
 - b. He was born and experienced his early years in Tarsus.
 - c. He was a Roman citizen by birth. He was a Hebrew of the diaspora.
 - d. Since Greek culture was embraced by the Romans, Paul was exposed to Hellenism as is evident in Athens.
 - e. He was of the tribe of Benjamin. (Was he named for its only king?)
 - f. He was raised in a devout Jewish family.
2. **From Tarsus to Jerusalem (ca. 15-31 AD)**
“Under Gamaliel I was thoroughly trained in the law of our fathers and was just as zealous for God as any of you are today (Acts 22:3).”

“...a Pharisee “...in regard to the law, a Pharisee; as for legalistic righteousness, faultless (Phil. 3:5).”

“... the son of Paul’s sister heard about the ambush, and he came and entered the barracks and told Paul (Acts 23:16).”

²⁴At this point Festus interrupted Paul’s defense. “You are out of your mind, Paul!” he shouted. “Your great learning is driving you insane (Acts 26:24).”

(Gamaliel was a very prominent rabban [doctor of the Law, a recognition above that of rabbi], a member of the Sanhedrin, and the grandson of the famous Hillel the Elder. He was the recognized as the leader of the Hillel Pharisees. While he opposed the Liberalism of the Sadducees, he appears to be tolerant of the romans and the early church [Acts 5:33-39].

What can we learn?

- a. He moved to Jerusalem at some point, likely with his family.**
- b. He had at least one sibling, a sister, and had a nephew living in Jerusalem,**
- c. He was trained by the most eminent scholar of his day.**
- d. He became a model Pharisee.**

**3. A persecutor of the saints in Jerusalem (ca. 31-33)
“as for zeal, persecuting the church... (Phil. 3:6).”**

“Meanwhile, the witnesses laid their clothes at the feet of a young man named Saul. While they were stoning him, Stephen prayed, “Lord Jesus, receive my spirit.” Then he fell on his knees and cried out, “Lord, do not hold this sin against them.” When he had said this, he fell asleep. And Saul was there, giving approval to his death (Acts 7:58-8:1).”

“On that day a great persecution broke out against the church at Jerusalem, and all except the apostles were scattered throughout Judea and Samaria. Godly men buried Stephen and mourned deeply for him. But Saul began to destroy the church. Going from house to house, he dragged off men and women and put them in prison Acts 8:1b-3).”

What can we learn?

- a. We can learn the truth of Matt. 23:15 (“... Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, because you travel around on the sea and the land to make a proselyte, you make him twice as much a son of hell as yourselves”).**
- b. He sanctioned Stephen’s death and heard his prayers as he did hear from Jesus.**
- c. He persecuted the early believers in Jerusalem.**

4. The persecutor of the Church Abroad

“Meanwhile, Saul was still breathing out murderous threats against the Lord’s disciples. He went to the high priest and asked him for letters to the synagogues in Damascus, so that if he found any there who belonged to the Way, whether men or women, he might take them as prisoners to Jerusalem (Acts 9:1-3).”

“As he neared Damascus on his journey, suddenly a light from heaven flashed around him. He fell to the ground and heard a voice say to him, ‘Saul, Saul, why do you persecute me?’ ‘Who are you, Lord?’ Saul asked. ‘I am Jesus, whom you are persecuting,’ he replied. Now get up and go into the city, and you will be told what you must do (Acts 9:3-5, also 22:6-11).”

What can we learn?

- a. He was zealous in his convictions.**
- b. What happened to Paul came from heaven, a light brighter than he could conceive.**
- c. Jesus called him by his name.**
- d. Passed errors are no cause for divine abandonment; it is the reason for His intervention. There is hope for the most calloused of people.**

5. The conversion and calling of Saul (34 AD)

“A man named Ananias came to see me. He was a devout observer of the law and highly respected by all the Jews living there. He stood beside me and said, ‘Brother Saul, receive your sight!’ And at that very moment I was able to see him. “Then he said: ‘The God of our fathers has chosen you to know his will and to see the Righteous One and to hear words from his mouth. You will be his witness to all men of what you have seen and heard. And now what are you waiting for? Get up, be baptized, and wash your sins away, calling on his name’ (Acts 9:12-17).”

“¹But when God, who set me apart from birth and called me by his grace, was pleased ¹to reveal his Son in me so that I might preach him among the Gentile (Gal. 1:15-16a).”

What can we learn?

- a. Ananias is wonderful example of obedience.**
- b. Paul was converted before Damascus, but he needed instruction.**
- c. God have a specific, shocking mission for Paul and He told him at the beginning.**
- d. Baptism implies a new identity for a convert whose sins are cleansed.**
- e. God has marked each of us out for Himself from our first breath.**

6. The solitary in Arabia (34-37 AD)

“... I did not consult any man, nor did I go up to Jerusalem to see those who were apostles before I was, but I went immediately into Arabia ... (Gal. 1:16b-17).”

What can we learn?

- a. Paul had a lot to learn so he went into isolation. It is at times to be quiet and away from hustle and bustle.**
- b. Solitude with the Holy Scripture is needed at major changes in our lives.**
- c. There is no record of Paul’s activities and much speculation in these years.**
- d. We all have wilderness years, times that seem like we have been put on a shelf.**
- d. The location of “Arabia” is uncertain for in ancient times it was the desert from Syria into the Saudi Arabia today.**

7. The return to Damascus (37AD)

“... later returned to Damascus (Gal 5:17c)”

“Saul spent several days with the disciples in Damascus. At once he began to preach in the synagogues that Jesus is the Son of God. All those who heard him were astonished and asked, “Isn’t he the man who raised havoc in Jerusalem among those who call on this name? And hasn’t he come here to take them as prisoners to the chief priests?” Yet Saul grew more and more powerful and baffled the Jews living in Damascus by proving that Jesus is the Christ (Acts 9:19-22).”

“After many days had gone by, the Jews conspired to kill him, but Saul learned of their plan. Day and night they kept close watch on the city gates in order to kill him. ²⁵But his followers took him by night and lowered him in a basket through an opening in the wall (Acts 9:23-25).”

“In Damascus the governor under King Aretas had the city of the Damascenes guarded in order to arrest me. But I was lowered in a basket from a window in the wall and slipped through his hands (II Cor. 11:32-33).”

(Aretas IV [9 BC-40 AD] was a Nabatean monarch who ruled over “Arabia.” His capitol was in Damascus but likely most known for the city of Petra. Nabateans were traders that plied the spice routes from the East to Gaza in the West and Rome.)

What can we learn?

- a. Paul was courageous as well as learned.**
- b. Troubles often follow the faithful witness of Christ.**
- c. God preserves His children**

8. The initial return to Jerusalem (37 AD)

“When he came to Jerusalem, he tried to join the disciples, but they were all afraid of him, not believing that he really was a disciple. But Barnabas took him and brought him to the apostles. He told them how Saul on his journey had seen the Lord and that the Lord had spoken to him, and how in Damascus he had preached fearlessly in the name of Jesus. So, Saul stayed with them and moved about freely in Jerusalem, speaking boldly in the name of the Lord. He talked and debated with the Grecian Jews, but they tried to kill him (Acts 9:23-29).”

What can we learn?

- a. Sometimes it is hard to envision that the past is not also the present.**
- b. We all need a Barnabas, a “Son of Encouragement,” in our lives.**

9. The return to Tarsus (37-43 AD)

“When the brothers learned of this, they took him down to Caesarea and sent him off to Tarsus (Acts 9:30).”

What can we learn?

- a. Years of experience prepares one for greater service.**
- b. God entrusts us with smaller things before He does with bigger things.**