

**The Third Day: Living the Resurrection – 5. Paul**  
**Acts 9:1-18**  
**March 17, 2024**  
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Over the past decade or so we've seen the rise in popularity in these home improvement shows. One of the first shows of this kind that I remember watching was *Fixer Upper* that was filmed on location in Waco, Texas from 2013-2017 and hosted by Chip and Joanna Gains. Jerry and I lived in Waco in the late 1990's so we took extra interest in this show. Last spring, Jerry and I made a trip back to Texas to visit some of our old stomping grounds which including Baylor University and the Gain's new Magnolia Marketplace. (I call it a Disneyland for adults, minus the rides.) For those of you who enjoyed watching *Fixer Upper* like I did, the Gains are launching a new show this summer, on their very own Magnolia Network called *Fixer Upper: The Lakehouse*. So that is something to look forward to if you're a fan.

But no matter which do-it-yourself (DIY) show you watch, they all have similar plots. A contractor and design team meets with a client who bought some run-down home as a fixer upper, and they contract the show to do the flip or transformation. There is usually a budget involved, that's where the tension in the show comes from, they are up against this budget and trying to make sure they come in under budget. And low and behold, at the end of the show, they do the big reveal, and the house has been transformed and looks amazing! Here's a before and after picture from *Fixer Upper*. Every time I see the big reveals, I am always in awe of those of you who have the skills and the know-how for these kind of do-it-yourself projects at home. I am wondering, by a show of hands, how many of you are really good at DIY projects? Now, I have another question for you. I am not going to ask you to raise your hands for this question because there is a big difference between transforming a house and transforming your life. But if I were to ask, who is really good at transforming a life, I am guessing not many of us would raise our hands.

Today is our fourth message in this sermon series where we are looking at resurrection encounters with Christ that transformed the lives of Jesus' disciples, and in this case, the course of Christianity throughout the history. Paul's life and testimony are certainly convincing pieces of evidence for the power of the Resurrection of Jesus. So today, by looking at some of his key writings, we'll hear about the promise of the Resurrection regarding personal transformation and the redeeming work of God in the world. Paul understood that following Christ would lead to a change of behavior where we put off our old habits, which are often self-focused and serve primarily ourselves, and instead, put on the way of Christ; to be transformed by Christ. This means living the way of love towards God, others, and us.

So let's meet Paul. First, let's start with his name. Is it Saul or is it Paul? Actually, it's both. Like all Jews, living in the Roman Empire, he had two names. When he was born, his Hebrew name was Saul, after King Saul, the first king of Israel. So, he had a lot of expectations placed upon him at a very early age. But his Roman name was Paul. After his conversion, after he became an apostle of Christ, he went by Paul because he was going into the Roman world to preach primarily to gentiles. For the simplicity of today's message, I am going to call him Paul.

Aside from Jesus, there is no human being who has had a greater impact on the Christian faith than Paul. Paul was the principal theologian of the early church and the one who felt the call from Christ from a small sect of Judaism to go out into the Greco-Roman world. He started churches throughout the Roman world and because of his work, Christianity is today the faith of about 31% of the world's population today. Thirteen of the 27 books of the New Testament are

Paul's letters that he wrote to the churches that he started or the leaders of those churches. His words have been read more than any other author in all human history. And so, by looking at his story and his encounter with the risen Christ, our lives can be impacted still today.

Paul grew up Tarsus (modern day Turkey for us) which was located on a major trade route with modern roads. At the time, this city was the fifth largest city in the Roman Empire with a population of about 200,000 people. It was the center of learning of Greek philosophy. Paul grew up within a small Jewish community, but he was surrounded by Gentiles. So, he knew their world and how they thought. In addition to Hebrew, he learned Greek that enabled him to write letters in the language that everybody spoke and to preach in every city, not just to Jewish people.

He grew up with the finest education possible in which he learned about the Greek philosophers but also about the Jewish Law. His parents were Roman citizens. Only 10% of the Roman empire were citizens. So being a Roman citizen came with special benefits and high esteem and with extra protection for him. Tradition tells us that Paul's parents were probably tent makers. This was a big business in this area at that time. We know that Paul learned the business from his folks because as an adult, he made tents to support himself as he traveled and preached the gospel.

At the age of 13, the age that a boy becomes a man in the Jewish tradition, he was sent to a boarding school in Jerusalem where he studied for six years under the tutelage of the most highly esteemed Jewish rabbi of the first century, Gamaliel. This would be for us, like going to Harvard or Yale and Paul became an expert in the law and eventually a Pharisee. The name Pharisee means "separate ones." These were a group of very devout Jews, whose goal was to fully live out all the Jewish laws and customs.

So that's a little bit about Paul's background. The first time we encounter Paul in scripture is in Luke's writings in Acts, chapter seven where he writes about Stephen's persecution after Stephen claimed that Jesus was the true Messiah who had been raised from the dead.

*At this, they shrieked and covered their ears. Together, they charged at him, threw him out of the city, and began to stone him. The witnesses placed their coats in the care of a young man named Saul. (Acts 7:57-58) Then in Acts 8:1-3 we read.... "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. Devout men buried Stephen and made loud lamentations over him. But Saul was ravaging the church by entering house after house; dragging off both men and women, he committed them to prison."*

Paul was a bad guy! He regularly organized these kinds of violent acts. He arrested the followers of Jesus to silence them, but I wonder if he might also have been overly ambitious. He was 22 years old at this point, Christ had died and risen from the grave. While Paul lived in Jerusalem while all of this was taking place for Jesus, there is no evidence that Paul ever actually met Jesus in person. And so, having just graduated from seminary, to make a name for himself, he volunteered to do what no one else would do, silence the followers of Jesus.

This reminds me of how all of us can be blinded by our own ambitions. Sometimes we're willing to compromise on things we know to be true. Sometimes we can believe something is true, or want it to be true, so much so that we don't even take time to question it. "I read it on Facebook so it must be true." And we push that "share" button and perpetuate the sharing of misinformation without first fact-checking it. And in our conviction that something is true, and in our own sin and

ambition, we can end up doing terrible things that are directly opposed to our faith. It was true for Paul and is still true for us today.

Everything Paul did in his early years, he did because he truly believed Jesus was a false Messiah and his followers were threats to authentic Judaism. He believed everything he did was to honor God. As I was thinking about this, I was reminded of the videos we've all seen coming from the war in Gaza where young men, with machine guns are strapped to their backs, are yelling *God is the greatest* as the head out to commit unthinkable atrocities against other human beings for Hamas, all in the name of "god." Something evil and broken has taken over their hearts and minds.

Just to be clear, there is a difference between Hamas and the vast majority of the Palestinian people. They are not one in the same. Most Islamic Palestinians are not Hamas. This situation is a horrific mess caused by humanity's brokenness, rage, anger, and sin. And if we think this isolated to Hamas, let me remind you that we've seen this played throughout human history. We've seen it in the Christian Crusades, military expeditions of the European Christians against the people of the near east. We see it played out in the KKK right here in America, and in Nazi Germany during World War II. Do you know what it said on the Nazi German soldier's belt buckles? God is with us. Emmanuel. Can you imagine?

*We read on in Acts 9: Meanwhile, Saul was still spewing out murderous threats against the Lord's disciples. He went to the high priest, seeking letters to the synagogues in Damascus. If he found persons who belonged to the Way, (followers of Jesus) whether men or women, these letters would authorize him to take them as prisoners to Jerusalem. During the journey, as he approached Damascus, suddenly a light from heaven encircled him. He fell to the ground and heard a voice asking him, "Saul, Saul, why are you harassing me?"*

*Saul asked, "Who are you, Lord?"*

*"I am Jesus, whom you are harassing," came the reply. "Now get up and enter the city. You will be told what you must do." ... For three days he was blind and neither ate nor drank anything. Acts 9:17-19*

This is a powerful fixer-upper story of transformation. Paul was blinded by the light, but he wasn't transformed immediately. He sat in darkness for three days. At first, his transformation was just physical. He lost his vision. This temporary blindness helped Paul see that he had been spiritually blinded to the truth about Jesus. And when he did, Paul was humbled and had to rely on other people to help him to a house nearby to recuperate. He could not have done this on his own. A few days later, a man named Ananias came to see Paul and prayed that his sight would be restored. Attempts to attain self-righteousness through personal adherence to Jewish laws and customs did not lead Paul to the greatest spiritual moment of his life. The Resurrection of Jesus did that. And we cannot make our lives right with God through our own power or actions either. The resurrection of Jesus did that for us too.

With each message I write, I look for something to help make a real-life connect for us. As I was thinking about this this week, having just watched the Oscars last Sunday night and this being the beginning of Ramadan for our Muslim friends, I came across this Oscar-nominated short film. And as I watched it, I realized, this is exactly what happened to Paul.

*The Stranger at the Gate* is a 30-minute documentary focused on a man named Mark McKinney. He was a Marine for 25 years and during his time as a Marine, he served in some of the toughest places in the world, like Afghanistan and Iraq. He himself had killed many people.

He had been taught to look at them as if they were not people but instead just paper targets to be shot at in target practice. 25 years of that left him with severe PTSD. He finally retired and came back to the United States, married a woman who had a little girl and they moved to Muncie, Indiana to begin a life together. But when they arrived there, he found that there were Muslims in Muncie. He had just spent 25 years killing Muslims in these other countries. It made him so angry to find them in his hometown. What put him over the top was seeing a Muslim boy who went to school with his daughter and Mac began to imagine all the things he thought the Muslims wanted to do to us, to destroy Americans and destroy America. He finally came to the decision that he had to do something about that, so he came up with a plan to detonate a bomb in front of the Islamic Center in Muncie with the hope of killing at least 200 Muslims.

But first, he thought he should go to the Islamic Center and scope it out. And in the film, it describes the people who met him that day. They were nervous when he came in because of the way he was acting. They sensed something was off with him. One of the Islamic men, a family physician in Muncie, came up to him and just wrapped his arms around him and just held him. And then there was another who did the same so Mac left there feeling very confused. But he came back the next day, and then next, and slowly his life was changed.

I often tell people, in fact I had this conversation just this week, it is not our Biblical knowledge or superior theological arguments that will win people to Christ. Do you know what it is? It is our capacity to love. That sacrificial love, even, or maybe especially for our enemy, or the one of whom we are afraid. That is what leads people to ask what you believe and why they would want to be a part of this community. That is exactly what happened to Mac. He was transformed by their love. Today he travels the country sharing his story of transformation.

I don't want to gloss over the fact that Mac was converted to Islam. But as Christians, we are called follow Christ, tell the stories of the Good News of Jesus Christ and to invite others to do the same. But to me, this story shows the importance of building relationships of love and acceptance, regardless of our differences. There's an organization called Tapestry that was started right here in this community following the hate killings in Paris at Charlie Hebdo Magazine in 2017. This interfaith group for women was started by a Methodist, a Muslim and a Mormon to promote religious understanding and acceptance through dialogue and service in the community between women of different faiths. In fact, their next meeting is coming up on April 18 at the Ridgedale Library and the topic that night is kosher and halal food. I think this is exactly what John Wesley meant when he said, *although we cannot think alike, may we not love alike?* When Paul was transformed, his hatred was transformed to love. He's the one who wrote 1 Corinthians 13, *love is patient, love is kind. If don't have love, I am nothing.*

This is the powerful perspective Paul shares with the world, which was born out of his experience with the resurrected Christ, not only on the Road to Damascus but also throughout his years of ministry that followed. Paul wrote this remarkable statement to the church in Rome that reflects his perspective and one he hoped others, including you and me, would adopt.

*If God is for us, who is against us? He didn't spare his own Son but gave him up for us all. Won't he also freely give us all things with him?*

*Who is going to convict them? It is Christ Jesus who died, even more, who was raised, and who also is at God's right side. It is Christ Jesus who also pleads our case for us.*

*Who will separate us from Christ's love? Will we be separated by trouble, or distress, or harassment, or famine, or nakedness, or danger, or sword? But in all these things we win a*

*sweeping victory through the one who loved us. I'm convinced that nothing can separate us from God's love in Christ Jesus our Lord: not death or life, not angels or rulers, not present things or future things, not powers or height or depth, or any other thing that is created.*

Paul spent the rest of his life traveling the world to share the good news of Jesus Christ. What is it that led this first century rabbi to travel thousands of miles by sea and by land, to be beaten, imprisoned, and ultimately beheaded for his faith? It was a call to turn the world upside down. This is the story of the Apostle Paul whose writings continue to shape our lives still today. Paul's perspective serves as a reminder that the trials and tribulations of this world are temporary, and relatively minor, compared to the promise of the resurrection. The resurrection of Jesus Christ offers us this dual perspective, we can see the struggles and tragedies and present sufferings of this life, while at the same time, acknowledge that there is a greater reality beyond our immediate circumstances. And the inward peace of the Holy Spirit allows us to navigate through this present life with a forward focus on spiritual growth and maturity and bringing the kingdom of heaven here on earth.

On HGTV, it is all about the big reveal. What will your big reveal look like? As Christians, we are called to show the world that we love. One day, Jesus will return, and the resurrected Lord will restore and renew all of creation. Until that day, let us stay strong, doing the work of the Lord and knowing that our work is not in vain. Putting off our old habits so to be transformed by Christ and living the way of love towards God, others, and ourselves.

Let us pray. Redeeming God, thank you for loving us as we are and loving us so much to meet us on whatever road we are on. We are grateful for the gift of the Holy Spirit and the ongoing work of transformation you are doing in each of us. Help us to cooperate with that process and continue to guide us in the specific ways you would have each of us serve, working with you to bring hope and healing to a broken world. May we "work for the good of all whenever we have the opportunity." in Jesus' name, Amen.

## **Grow, Pray, Study for the Week of March 17, 2024**

### **Weekly Prayer**

Loving God, I want to be a living example of Your love in our world. Let me learn to be content in all circumstances of my life, treating others with compassion and respect and settling differences with love and integrity. Open my heart to your ongoing presence so that I may grow in faithfulness and love and bring honor to Your name. Amen.

### **Monday, March 18**

#### **Scripture: Acts 7:54-8:3, 9:1-2**

Once the council members heard these words, they were enraged and began to grind their teeth at Stephen. But Stephen, enabled by the Holy Spirit, stared into heaven and saw God's majesty and Jesus standing at God's right side. He exclaimed, "Look! I can see heaven on display and the Human One standing at God's right side!" At this, they shrieked and covered their ears. Together, they charged at him, threw him out of the city, and began to stone him. The witnesses placed their coats in the care of a young man named Saul. As they battered him with stones, Stephen prayed, "Lord Jesus, accept my life!" Falling to his knees, he shouted, "Lord, don't hold this sin against them!" Then he died.

Saul was in full agreement with Stephen's murder.

At that time, the church in Jerusalem began to be subjected to vicious harassment. Everyone except the apostles was scattered throughout the regions of Judea and Samaria. Some pious men buried Stephen and deeply grieved over him. Saul began to wreak havoc against the church. Entering one house after another, he would drag off both men and women and throw them into prison.

Meanwhile, Saul was still spewing out murderous threats against the Lord's disciples. He went to the high priest, seeking letters to the synagogues in Damascus. If he found persons who belonged to the Way, whether men or women, these letters would authorize him to take them as prisoners to Jerusalem.

### **Observation**

A man with the Hebrew name Saul first appeared in the book of Acts as almost a bit player, holding other people's coats. He quickly became prominent as a driven, deadly persecutor of early Christians. Tomorrow we'll read a longer account of his testimony at a trial later in his life. At that time, he said, "I really thought that I ought to oppose the name of Jesus the Nazarene in every way possible" (Acts 26:9, also Galatians 1:14).

### **Application**

In Saul's background and education, nearly every person he respected, from the high priest down, rejected Jesus and saw Christians as a threat to God's truth. No wonder he set out, with great passion, to destroy a faith he saw as seriously wrong. Did your background and training make it easy or hard for you to believe in Jesus? How well are you able to understand and relate to people with backgrounds different from yours?

### **Prayer**

Lord Jesus, your life offered all of us grace and a place with a God who loves relentlessly. Help me never to distort that message by denying grace to people who aren't just like me. Amen.

## **Tuesday, March 19**

### **Scripture: Acts 22:3-5, 26:4-11**

Paul continued, "I'm a Jew, born in Tarsus in Cilicia but raised in this city. Under Gamaliel's instruction, I was trained in the strict interpretation of our ancestral Law. I am passionately loyal to God, just like you who are gathered here today. I harassed those who followed this Way to their death, arresting and delivering both men and women into prison. The high priest and the whole Jerusalem Council can testify about me. I received letters from them, addressed to our associates in Damascus, then went there to bring those who were arrested to Jerusalem so they could be punished.

Every Jew knows the way of life I have followed since my youth because, from the beginning, I was among my people and in Jerusalem. They have known me for a long time. If they wanted to, they could testify that I followed the way of life set out by the most exacting group of our religion. I am a Pharisee. Today I am standing trial because of the hope in the promise God gave our ancestors. This is the promise our twelve tribes hope to receive as they earnestly worship night and day. The Jews are accusing me, King Agrippa, because of this hope! Why is it inconceivable to you that God raises the dead? "I really thought that I ought to oppose the name of Jesus the Nazarene in every way possible. <sup>1</sup>And that's exactly what I did in Jerusalem. I locked up many of God's holy people in prison under the authority of the chief priests. When they were condemned to death, I voted against them. <sup>1</sup>In one synagogue after another—indeed,

in all the synagogues—I would often torture them, compelling them to slander God. My rage bordered on the hysterical as I pursued them, even to foreign cities.

### **Observation**

Saul's father and mother were part of the Jewish diaspora, living in Tarsus, a major city in the eastern part of the Roman Empire. Tarsus was an important intellectual center. 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. 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.

### **Application**

Evidence suggests that Saul was a young man on the rise. He likely expected influence and comfort as a religious leader in Jerusalem. It was Paul's ambition, combined with his unwavering religious convictions, that may have led him to the work of persecuting the fledgling Christian movement. How can ambition, often a positive quality, lead to choosing a life path that you might later regret?

### **Prayer**

Lord Jesus, thank you for the gift of relationship that doesn't depend on my successes. Help me to live into the covenant you have made based on your unconditional love for your people. Amen.

### **Wednesday, March 20**

#### **Scripture: Acts 9:3-9, 26:12-18**

During the journey, as he approached Damascus, suddenly a light from heaven encircled him. He fell to the ground and heard a voice asking him, "Saul, Saul, why are you harassing me?" Saul asked, "Who are you, Lord?" "I am Jesus, whom you are harassing," came the reply. "Now get up and enter the city. You will be told what you must do." Those traveling with him stood there speechless; they heard the voice but saw no one. After they picked Saul up from the ground, he opened his eyes but he couldn't see. So they led him by the hand into Damascus. For three days he was blind and neither ate nor drank anything.

"On one such journey, I was going to Damascus with the full authority of the chief priests. While on the road at midday, King Agrippa, I saw a light from heaven shining around me and my traveling companions. That light was brighter than the sun. We all fell to the ground, and I heard a voice that said to me in Aramaic, 'Saul, Saul, why are you harassing me? It's hard for you to kick against a spear.' Then I said, 'Who are you, Lord?' The Lord replied, 'I am Jesus, whom you are harassing. Get up! Stand on your feet! I have appeared to you for this purpose: to appoint you as my servant and witness of what you have seen and what I will show you. I will rescue you from your own people and from the Gentiles. I am sending you to open their eyes. Then they can turn from darkness to light and from the power of Satan to God, and receive forgiveness of sins and a place among those who are made holy by faith in me.'

### **Observation**

Scholar N. T. Wright said devout Pharisees meditated at times on Ezekiel 1's vision (which showed God coming across the desert to Hebrew exiles in Babylon). What if Saul was doing that as he rode? Imagine his excitement as, in the depth of devout meditation, he saw with the eyes of his heart, so real that it seemed as though he was seeing it with his ordinary physical

eyes, and then so real that he realized he was seeing it with his physical eyes, the form, the fire, the blazing light, and—the face! And the face was the face of Jesus of Nazareth.

### **Application**

Paul did not treat his meeting with Jesus on the road to Damascus as “just a vision,” an illusory, inward incident. He believed he’d met the risen Christ just as “really” as any other apostle (1 Corinthians 15:5-9). It was so significant that Paul told (and Luke reported) two additional versions of it (Acts 22:3–16; 26:9–18). What evidence or experiences have most strongly led you to share Paul’s faith that Jesus is truly alive, and to order your life around that faith?

### **Prayer**

Lord Jesus, even when I resist your direction for my life, you don’t give up on me. Thank you for the times, large or small, when your “goading” has moved me to a more positive way of life. Amen.

### **Thursday, March 21**

#### **Scripture: Acts 9:10-18, 22:12-16**

In Damascus there was a certain disciple named Ananias. The Lord spoke to him in a vision, “Ananias!” He answered, “Yes, Lord.” The Lord instructed him, “Go to Judas’ house on Straight Street and ask for a man from Tarsus named Saul. He is praying. In a vision he has seen a man named Ananias enter and put his hands on him to restore his sight.” Ananias countered, “Lord, I have heard many reports about this man. People say he has done horrible things to your holy people in Jerusalem. He’s here with authority from the chief priests to arrest everyone who calls on your name.” The Lord replied, “Go! This man is the agent I have chosen to carry my name before Gentiles, kings, and Israelites. I will show him how much he must suffer for the sake of my name.” Ananias went to the house. He placed his hands on Saul and said, “Brother Saul, the Lord sent me—Jesus, who appeared to you on the way as you were coming here. He sent me so that you could see again and be filled with the Holy Spirit.” Instantly, flakes fell from Saul’s eyes and he could see again. He got up and was baptized.

“There was a certain man named Ananias. According to the standards of the Law, he was a pious man who enjoyed the respect of all the Jews living there. He came and stood beside me. ‘Brother Saul, receive your sight!’ he said. Instantly, I regained my sight and I could see him. He said, ‘The God of our ancestors has selected you to know his will, to see the righteous one, and to hear his voice. You will be his witness to everyone concerning what you have seen and heard. What are you waiting for? Get up, be baptized, and wash away your sins as you call on his name.’

### **Observation**

In music, we sometimes refer to a particular singer or band as a “one-hit wonder.” There are Bible characters who, somewhat similarly, only make one appearance in the Bible story, and yet play a deeply significant role. One of them was a Christian in Damascus named Ananias. He knew Saul’s reputation for persecuting Christians yet obeyed (not without some fear) a divine directive to go and pray for Saul. Imagine the courage it must have taken for Ananias to confront Paul the inquisitor.

### **Application**

Acts 9 talked about Ananias bravely going to a man who had come to town to imprison, maybe even kill, him. When on trial, in Acts 22, Paul remembered that Ananias was eager to get him baptized, despite his track record of violently opposing Christians. Has God ever called you to



do something good that nevertheless scared you and called for some courage? If God called you to an “Ananias” mission today, how easy, or hard do you believe it would be for you to respond?

### **Prayer**

Lord, if Ananias had said “no,” he would have missed the chance to be part of a historically great moment. Help me not to miss your call, or to fail to answer. Amen.

### **Friday, March 22**

#### **Scripture: Acts 9:20-25, 28-30; Galatians 1:11-12, 15-23, 2:1-2**

Right away, he began to preach about Jesus in the synagogues. “He is God’s Son,” he declared. Everyone who heard him was baffled. They questioned each other, “Isn’t he the one who was wreaking havoc among those in Jerusalem who called on this name? Hadn’t he come here to take those same people as prisoners to the chief priests?” But Saul grew stronger and stronger. He confused the Jews who lived in Damascus by proving that Jesus is the Christ. After this had gone on for some time, the Jews hatched a plot to kill Saul. However, he found out about their scheme. They were keeping watch at the city gates around the clock so they could assassinate him. But his disciples took him by night and lowered him in a basket through an opening in the city wall.

After this, Saul moved freely among the disciples in Jerusalem and was speaking with confidence in the name of the Lord. He got into debates with the Greek-speaking Jews as well, but they tried to kill him. When the family of believers learned about this, they escorted him down to Caesarea and sent him off to Tarsus.

Brothers and sisters, I want you to know that the gospel I preached isn’t human in origin. I didn’t receive it or learn it from a human. It came through a revelation from Jesus Christ.

But God had set me apart from birth and called me through his grace. He was pleased to reveal his Son to me, so that I might preach about him to the Gentiles. I didn’t immediately consult with any human being. I didn’t go up to Jerusalem to see the men who were apostles before me either, but I went away into Arabia and I returned again to Damascus. Then after three years I went up to Jerusalem to visit Cephas and stayed with him fifteen days. But I didn’t see any other of the apostles except James the brother of the Lord. Before God, I’m not lying about the things that I’m writing to you! Then I went into the regions of Syria and Cilicia, but I wasn’t known personally by the Christian churches in Judea. They only heard a report about me: “The man who used to harass us now preaches the faith that he once tried to destroy.”

Then after fourteen years I went up to Jerusalem again with Barnabas, and I took Titus along also. I went there because of a revelation, and I laid out the gospel that I preach to the Gentiles for them. But I did it privately with the influential leaders to make sure that I wouldn’t be working or that I hadn’t worked for nothing.

### **Observation**

As the apostle Paul wrote to Christians in the province of Galatia, he spoke of three years in Arabia and Damascus, and then a fourteen-year gap. It’s hard to exactly match those time periods in the way Luke told Paul’s story in Acts. (Luke did show the shift from the Hebrew “Saul” to the Greek name “Paul” in Acts 13:9.)

## **Application**

Paul began to preach “right away” (Acts 9:20). Yet it took years (in Arabia, Tarsus, Damascus) to think through how his rabbinic Scripture learning fit with the stunning reality of meeting the risen Jesus before he could write masterworks like Galatians or Romans. Why are both the core good news about Jesus and careful thought and study of how to apply that faith vital to your Christian walk?

## **Prayer**

Lord Jesus, in so many ways your truth is simple. But the world I live in, with all its beauty and brokenness, raises many questions about how to apply your truth in my complicated life. Guide me as you guided the apostle Paul. Amen.

## **Saturday, March 23**

### **Scripture: Acts 4:36-37, 9:26-28, 11:19-26**

Joseph, whom the apostles nicknamed Barnabas (that is, “one who encourages”), was a Levite from Cyprus. He owned a field, sold it, brought the money, and placed it in the care and under the authority of the apostles.

When Saul arrived in Jerusalem, he tried to join the disciples, but they were all afraid of him. They didn’t believe he was really a disciple. Then Barnabas brought Saul to the apostles and told them the story about how Saul saw the Lord on the way and that the Lord had spoken to Saul. He also told them about the confidence with which Saul had preached in the name of Jesus in Damascus. After this, Saul moved freely among the disciples in Jerusalem and was speaking with confidence in the name of the Lord.

Now those who were scattered as a result of the trouble that occurred because of Stephen traveled as far as Phoenicia, Cyprus, and Antioch. They proclaimed the word only to Jews. Among them were some people from Cyprus and Cyrene. They entered Antioch and began to proclaim the good news about the Lord Jesus also to Gentiles. The Lord’s power was with them, and a large number came to believe and turned to the Lord. When the church in Jerusalem heard about this, they sent Barnabas to Antioch. When he arrived and saw evidence of God’s grace, he was overjoyed and encouraged everyone to remain fully committed to the Lord. Barnabas responded in this way because he was a good man, whom the Holy Spirit had endowed with exceptional faith. A considerable number of people were added to the Lord. Barnabas went to Tarsus in search of Saul. When he found him, he brought him to Antioch. They were there for a whole year, meeting with the church and teaching large numbers of people. It was in Antioch where the disciples were first labeled “Christians.”

## **Observation**

Two days ago, we read about the only time the Bible mentioned Ananias. Another person mentioned far more than once, played a major role in Paul’s story: Joseph (nicknamed “Barnabas” = one who encourages). The nickname stuck, clearly because it fit the man so well. The apostle Paul brought immense talents and conviction to his mission of preaching Jesus to the Mediterranean world. But 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.

**Application**

Acts 9:26-28 says Judean Christians first accepted Paul because they trusted Barnabas, who vouched for Paul's honesty. How can you be a "Barnabas," helping others do the ministry work God calls them to? Scholar N. T. Wright told how Barnabas and Paul's work in Antioch, a diverse city, linked Christ's disciples to his name: "There the word 'Christian' first came into use. It was a nickname... just as 'Methodist' was at first a word used by the opponents of Wesley and his friends to sneer at their 'Methodical' ways of organizing their Bible study and prayer groups. Like many nicknames, it tells us a lot about the popular perception of what was going on. You would hear every language... in Antioch... but the one you could guarantee to be understood was... Greek. 'Christ'... was the Greek word for 'Messiah,'... 'God's anointed king.' Jesus' followers were thinking and speaking in such a way that they were called 'the king's people,' 'Messianists,' Christians." Are you grateful to be able to bear the name "Christian," with all it implies?

**Prayer**

Lord Jesus, it is because you are "the Christ" (God's anointed king) that I am a Christ-ian. You are my king, and I look forward to spending eternity with you. Amen.