

## Week 4: Paul's Earliest Ministry

Introduction: What exactly did Paul do during the fourteen or so years between his conversion and the commencement of his first missionary journey? This lesson will attempt to piece together his movements and suggest possible ramifications for us today.

### I. PAUL'S MINISTRY AROUND DAMASCUS

#### A. Preaching in Damascus - Acts 9:20-22; Galatians 1:16-17

1. He began immediately to proclaim Christ boldly – Acts 9:27
2. He proclaimed Christ's deity from the beginning – Acts 9:20
3. He acted with apostolic authority from Christ alone
4. His actions confounded the people

#### B. Preaching in Arabia – Galatians 1:17

1. Little is known for certain about this period of Paul's experience
2. Two theories about this period prevail
  - a) The mystical theory<sup>1</sup>
  - b) The ministry theory<sup>2</sup> - Isaiah 60:6-7
3. Obedience to his cross-cultural<sup>3</sup> commission to Gentiles

#### C. First attempt on Paul's life – Acts 9:22-25; 2 Corinthians 11:33

1. The royal plot against Paul
  - a) For religious reasons<sup>4</sup> - 2 Corinthians 11:32

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<sup>1</sup> This is the idea that Paul withdrew for meditation and reflection (like Moses or Elijah) into the wilderness so that he could piece together a formulation of his knowledge of the Old Testament with his new insight of Jesus as the Messiah. Some would even say that during this period, Jesus Himself came to Paul to teach and correct him (c.f. Galatians. 1:12).

<sup>2</sup> Schnabel, p. 61 "In Roman and in Jewish terminology, Arabia (Nabatea) was the region to the south of the Roman province of Syria; it included Moab and Edom and extended from the Hauran Mountains in the north to the regions east and west of the Gulf of Aqaba. Most of the inhabitants of Arabia were Nabateans whose language was a precursor of modern Arabic." Schnabel speculates that perhaps Paul wanted to minister among the Nabateans because they were descendants of Ishmael and because some of Israel's wilderness wanderings (including the death and burial of Aaron) occurred in this region.

<sup>3</sup> Paul's commission to the Gentiles did not begin with his missionary journeys. While his presence in Damascus seems to be focused largely on Jewish synagogues, not only would Damascus have been a multi-cultural environment, but his mission to Arabia/Nabatea is a deliberate excursion into gentile territory. (Schnabel, 1033)

<sup>4</sup> Schnabel, p. 59 "The fact that the Jews of Damascus succeeded in winning the support of the local representative of the Nabatean king Aretas IV for their plans to arrest Paul implies that they regarded Paul's activities as a threat for their community. This indicates that Paul's preaching had considerable success and that a good number of Jews were converted to faith in Jesus Christ."

b) For political reasons<sup>5</sup>

2. The escape in a basket<sup>6</sup>

## II. PAUL'S MINISTRY AT JERUSALEM

A. Visit with Peter – Acts 9:26-27; Galatians 1:18-19

1. In order to establish a relationship<sup>7</sup>

2. Assisted by Barnabas (Son of Consolation – Acts 4:36)

B. Ministry to the Hellenists – Acts 9:28-29

1. These were Paul's acquaintances<sup>8</sup>

2. Involved ongoing conversation and disputation

C. Second attempt on Paul's life – Acts 9:29-30

1. Enemies were looking for an opportunity to kill him

2. Jesus told Paul to escape the city – Acts 22:17-21

3. Friends delivered him to safety

## III. PAUL'S MINISTRY IN HIS HOMELAND

A. Apparently, Paul preached and planted churches throughout Syria and Cilicia

1. The letter from the Jerusalem Council was addressed to Gentile believers in this region – Acts 15:23

2. Paul strengthened existing churches in this region on his 2<sup>nd</sup> missionary journey – Acts 15:41

B. This undetailed period lasted about ten years

1. His home base was likely Tarsus – Acts 11:25-26

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<sup>5</sup> The Nabatean King Aretas IV Philodemos was in conflict at this time with Herod Antipas, the tetrarch of Galilee. In order to avoid intervention by the Romans he would have been quick to put down a surge of conversion to what he would have considered a sect of Judaism. The fact that Nabatean officials are eager to eliminate Paul points to the success of his ministry in the region (Schnabel, pp. 63-64).

<sup>6</sup> Reymond, p. 91 “[Paul] had gone to Damascus in full political power and prestige, authorized to imprison Jewish Christians; he had departed from Damascus with so little power and prestige with men that he had to escape those who would have killed him by hiding in a basket and being let down through a window in the wall of the city. Ministers today could learn from this: in what do *they* glory? In their great strengths and gifts or in their equally great (if not greater) weaknesses which alone enable Christ's power to rest upon them?

<sup>7</sup> Paul no doubt was eager to learn first-hand information about Christ's life and earthly ministry (Reymond, p. 93-94).

<sup>8</sup> Like any new convert, Paul was eager to explain his faith to his old friends and co-workers

2. It is likely that he was frequently persecuted during this period – 2 Corinthians 11:24-25<sup>9</sup>

#### IV. PAUL'S MINISTRY AT ANTIOCH

- A. Paul was recruited to assist a thriving church – Acts 11:25-26
  1. Antioch was the third largest city in the Roman Empire<sup>10</sup>
  2. The church at Antioch was founded by Hellenist Christians from Jerusalem who escaped Paul's persecution there – Acts 11:19-21
  3. Believers were first called Christians at Antioch<sup>11</sup> - Acts 11:26
  4. It was a truly multicultural congregation<sup>12</sup>
  5. Paul served as one of the principal teachers – Acts 13:1
- B. Paul and Barnabas delivered famine relief to Jerusalem – Acts 11:29-30; Galatians 2:1-10
  1. The visit provided an opportunity for the other Apostles to get to know and approve of Paul<sup>13</sup> – Galatians 2:6-9
  2. The visit connected John Mark (Barnabas' cousin – Col. 4:10) as a companion to Barnabas and Paul – Acts 12:25

Conclusion: From the moment of Paul's conversion, we see him begin to fulfill Jesus' plan for expanding His kingdom to the peoples of the earth through His followers who would make other disciples (Matthew 28:18-20) and be witnesses of their risen Lord (Acts 1:8). It was submissive response to Christ's authority and full dependence on His Holy Spirit that made Paul such an incredible minister of the Gospel. It will be those same qualities in us that will propel us toward faithful service for Christ's glory.

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<sup>9</sup> Bruce, p. 96 "With respect to these scourgings, according to the Mishna's 'Treatise on Punishments', after the upper body of the subject of the scourging was stripped bare of all clothing, his hands were tied to a stake, and with a scourge of two thongs the executioner, with all of the force of one hand, struck the subject thirteen times on the breast, thirteen times on the right shoulder, and thirteen times on the left. While the subject was being scourged, the chief judge read aloud Deuteronomy 28:58-59, then Deuteronomy 29:9, and finally, Psalm 78:38-39. The reading might be repeated but were so timed as to be completed exactly with the completion of the punishment. A second judge counted the blows, and a third exclaimed 'Strike him' before each blow. The potential for serious, if not fatal, physical harm from such a scourging can be drawn from the brief addition: '*If the criminal die under the infliction, the executioner is not accounted guilty unless he gives by mistake a single blow too many, in which case he is banished.*'"

<sup>10</sup> Schnabel, p. 71 states that the Jewish population was between 20,000 and 30,000 or 10% of the overall population

<sup>11</sup> Ibid, p. 73 "It is quite possible that the term *Christianoi* was an official designation coined by the Roman authorities in Antioch for the new religious group."

<sup>12</sup> As a large, cosmopolitan city, Antioch was a center for commerce which attracted people from all over the empire. Though the foundation of the church was surely Jewish, Antioch represents the first broad expansion of the Gospel among Gentiles.

<sup>13</sup> Bruce, p. 152 "What Paul was concerned about was not the validity of his gospel but its practicability. His commission was not derived from Jerusalem, but it could not be effectively discharged except in fellowship with Jerusalem." Also Dunn, *Jesus, Paul and the Law*, 115-116, "In short, in laying his gospel before the Jerusalem apostles what he sought was not much their approval (without which his gospel would have no validity) as their recognition of his gospel's validity (without which his gospel would lose its effectiveness).