

Paul, The Hidden Years

On paper as soon as Paul became a believer in Jesus it looked like he already had just what it takes to become the greatest theologian in the Bible. He was steeped in the Jewish Scriptures because he was born into a Jewish family of the Pharisee sect. He was a Roman citizen because of his family heritage. He was fluent in the Greek language and literature because he was born in Tarsus. His birthplace was a great cosmopolitan university city of the Roman Empire, “no mean city”. He was an intellectual. Paul was brilliant, highly educated under the esteemed teacher Gamaliel and he excelled in his studies. In many ways Paul was well qualified to take the Gospel from an obscure corner of the Roman Empire to its very epicenter in Rome, writing 27 books of the New Testament along the way. But there was something missing.

You may know the story of his conversion, how he aggressively persecuted Christians, passionately flushing out and arresting believers. On the road to Damascus he fell to the ground, blinded by the light of the Lord Jesus. Suddenly because of this encounter, everything changed in Paul’s life. Jesus appeared to him and nothing in his life would ever be the same again. Jesus called him to take the Gospel out to the world.

I believe that as soon as Paul received his sight and was baptized, he thought he was ready to roll for Jesus. “Immediately Paul began to proclaim the Lord Jesus in the synagogues.” Acts 9:21-23. With his incredible command of the Scriptures and his natural brilliance he must have felt fully prepared to take the Gospel out to the world. But God said, “Um, not quite yet.”.

The Hidden Years

We know from Galatians 2:1 that it will be 14 more years from his conversion before Paul will be sent off on his first missionary journey. These were the hidden years. We don’t have a lot of information about these years, probably on purpose. This was Paul’s alone time with the Lord, time to get to know Him. Time for the Lord to do deep things in Paul’s heart so that he would be thoroughly prepared to fulfill the calling on his life. We can’t be dogmatic about the order of these events, but here are a few of the things that happened during those 14 years.

Away to Arabia

Galatians 1:15-18, "I did not immediately consult with flesh and blood, nor did I go up to Jerusalem to those who were apostles before me; but I went away to Arabia, and returned once more to Damascus."

This is the only place in the Scriptures where Paul tells us about his interlude in Arabia. I imagine that it was something like spiritual bootcamp, an intensive Bible survey course, with personal instruction straight from the Lord. We know from I Corinthians 11 that Paul personally received teaching from the Lord about the Lord's supper, perhaps this happened while he was in Arabia. The Apostles had been with Jesus for three and a half years, Paul had a lot of catching up to do. He must have lapped this time up, in the presence of the Lord, having his spiritual eyes opened, suddenly seeing the Lord Jesus in all those passages he knew by heart. We don't know for sure how long he was in Arabia, it could have been close to three years.

Back to Damascus

He went back to Damascus, this time he created such a stir preaching about Jesus that the Pharisaical Jews plotted to do away with him. Acts 9:23-25. The manhunt was so intense that he had to be lowered over the city wall in a fish basket to escape with his life. This escape in the basket was so traumatic to Paul he mentions it later as an example of his suffering for Christ in II Corinthians 11.

Up to Jerusalem

Paul made his way to Jerusalem. You might expect a welcoming committee and red carpets rolling out for him, people fighting over whose group Paul was going to come to first and give his testimony. Acts 9:26-29, "When he came to Jerusalem, he was trying to associate with the disciples; but they were all afraid of him, not believing that he was a disciple. Only Barnabas gave him a chance."

Home to Tarsus

Acts 9:29, “He was talking and arguing with the Hellenistic Jews but they were attempting to put him to death. When the brethren learned of it they brought him down to Caesarea and sent him away to Tarsus.” His brothers in Christ sent him out of Jerusalem all the way home to Tarsus - where apparently he cooled his heels for several more years.

Alone in Arabia, thrown into a fish basket to escape in Damascus, not believed by the disciples, threats of murder by the Hellenistic Jews... Paul had heard from Jesus at his conversion God’s call on his life to take the Gospel out, yet he was thwarted and humiliated at every turn, misunderstood, rebuffed, rejected. The doors seemed closed for 14 years.

God is not in a hurry. He has all the time in the world to accomplish His purposes. He is more concerned about our character than our other qualifications. Paul needed time alone with the Lord getting to know him, this became the driving force of his life, “That I may know Him.” Paul also needed a deep work of the Holy Spirit in his heart. He needed to be brought low so that he no longer relied upon self and all his natural assets but upon God alone.

During those hidden years, Paul shifted from pride to counting all of those things he was proud of as but rubbish. By the end of those 14 years Paul was no longer trying to impress the Lord or anyone else. I imagine that when that moment finally came for the doors to open, Jesus said something like, “Saul, from now on you shall be called Paul. (and no one ever reverts to calling him Saul from here on out.) Do you know what the name Paul means? It means little, small, humble, low. Because of those hidden years when Paul had been sidelined, he was now humble before the Lord. He bowed low. In the kingdom, the way up is the way down. “Humble yourself in the sight of the Lord, and He will lift you up.” James 4:10. God did a deep work in Paul’s heart during the hidden years.

Barnabas sought him out in Tarsus and recruited him to help with the church at Antioch. Paul will be a different man from now on out as he blazes a trail

across the Roman Empire for Jesus. Paul was finally ready to roll. “I have been crucified with Christ and it is no longer I who live but Christ lives in me and the life which I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the son of God who loved me and delivered himself up for me.” Galatians 2:20.

Actions Points

Have you met the Lord Jesus? It may be in a quiet low key way as with Philip and the Ethiopian as they discussed the Scriptures or it may be a blinding white light like Paul, but the important thing is that you have come to know Jesus.

Are you willing to be misunderstood and rejected because of your faith in the Lord Jesus?

Who can you be a Barnabas to? Who needs encouragement?

Will you ask God to do a deep work in your heart? He knows just what you need. Yield to Him.

You may feel like you are stuck in obscurity and that you are so hidden that God has forgotten you, but do you know that God knows your address? Rely on Him. Yield to Him. He holds you in the palm of His hand.