

Chapter 29 – *The Story*

Why God Used Paul

March 17, 2019

Intro: Have you ever asked yourself, “Why is it that God tends to use some people mightily and other people just marginally?” Have you ever wondered what makes some people highly impactful while others seem to be just marking time?

Some of it, of course, is just the fact that God can use who he wants when he wants to do whatever he wants. But I find that it has a lot less to do with gifting and charisma and education than it has to do with other factors.

Today, we are going to take a dive into the Apostle Paul and five key reasons why God used him mightily. Perhaps it will inspire you to take some steps in that arena.

Now, just to catch you up, we are doing a survey of the Bible using a resource called *The Story*. It takes us through the narrative portions of the Bible to give us a big picture of what God has done through history. Today, we are in a book called Acts—after the life of Jesus, after his death and resurrection. It is after the gospel has spread throughout Jerusalem (chapters 1–7), Judea and Samaria (chapters 8–10 into chapter 11). The spotlight now turns from Peter & Phillip to Paul.

Why Paul Would Be Likely:

- Jewish heritage—Hebrew of Hebrews, circumcised on the eighth day, tribe of Benjamin, zeal (persecuting, legalistic righteousness—faultlessness)
- Educated by an all-star named Gamaliel
- Roman citizenship which was his passport to everywhere
- Dramatic conversion—knocked off his horse by a light that turned out to be Jesus. He turned from that moment on and followed him! A vision of the resurrected Jesus seems like the only plausible explanation of the conversion of Paul. And it makes his testimony so cool!

Why Paul Would Be Unlikely:

- Paul had not been a follower of Jesus’ revolutionary movement. In fact, he was vehemently opposed to it. His religious convictions informed him that the followers of this heretical movement were guilty of a capital crime worthy of punishment. Paul was a passionate persecutor of the church—present holding people’s cloaks as they stoned the first martyr, Stephen, and even going town to town to persecute Christians.
- Bow-legged, short, bald, bad eyesight
- After he converted, he wound up affiliating with a tiny minority group within the Jewish context as an untrusted outsider.
- His target audience was Gentile, but his subject was a Jewish carpenter from a Jewish history with a Jewish context to a Gentile audience (*Gentile* means anybody not Jewish).

- He was bent on taking on the most impressive empire in history with the story of a carpenter from Nazareth.
- It would be like a cultural critic from Estonia getting off the plane at JFK, taking the bus to Central Park, and then telling anyone who listened that a minority faction in Estonia has all the truth and everyone else is wrong.
- A few people actually believed him—so he starts a movement in New York and then a few months later goes to Chicago to start from scratch there... and write some letters to his friends in New York.

By the end, Paul had planted churches around the Mediterranean basin [\(show map\)](#). But how did he get from unlikely and obscure to what was probably the most influential public intellectual in history? There are five reasons.

Why God Used Paul:

1) A willingness to suffer

- a. Paul suffered everywhere he went and just took more. His willingness to suffer was one of his key characteristics!
- b. Five times I received from the Jews the forty lashes minus one. Three times I was beaten with rods, once I was pelted with stones, three times I was shipwrecked, I spent a night and a day in the open sea, I have been constantly on the move. I have been in danger from rivers, in danger from bandits, in danger from my fellow Jews, in danger from Gentiles; in danger in the city, in danger in the country, in danger at sea; and in danger from false believers. I have labored and toiled and have often gone without sleep; I have known hunger and thirst and have often gone without food; I have been cold and naked. Besides everything else, I face daily the pressure of my concern for all the churches. —2 Corinthians 11:24–28
 - i. Ha! All that suffering and to top it off, “CHURCH PEOPLE!”
- c. Honestly, this was Paul’s plan: *Go to a new city. Preach Jesus until they kick me out, beat me up, whip me, or stone me. Leave the city. Go to a new city. Repeat.* He kept going despite the fact that he knew he would suffer. Why did he do this? Partly because the mission was so important. Partly because he wanted to accomplish the mission. Partly because he wanted to be more like Jesus.
- d. I want to know Christ—yes, to know the power of his resurrection and participation in his sufferings, becoming like him in his death. —Philippians 3:10
- e. There is an aspect of knowing Jesus that you will never know until you suffer. You won’t know his presence, his power, his life until *and unless* you suffer with him and in his name. The pain is a doorway to *knowing* Christ. God used Paul because he was willing to move forward no matter what!
- f. Sometimes as Christians, we think our lives should be without trauma or drama—that the key is not going without pain or even serious pain... We have the wrong-headed notion that trusting Jesus makes our circumstances better. Not always true. It makes *your soul* better. It makes your internal world better. But your circumstances may improve, stay the same, or decline precipitously. In some environments, it is a *guarantee* of suffering. Let me ask you this very hard question: What if your faith in Jesus was a guarantee of suffering, like beatings and imprisonment and shipwrecks?

Would you still follow Jesus? God used Paul greatly because he was willing to suffer. I think Paul was able to do this because he considered himself dead, crucified with Christ—and dead people just don't worry about suffering. They don't claim their rights, because they are dead.

2) He followed Holy Spirit guidance (show maps of Damascus, Tarsus, Antioch)

- a. Antioch—multiethnic, multicultural, megachurch
 - i. Peter and Barnabas went to check it out.
 - ii. May have never gone into full-time mission work if it weren't for Barnabas.
 - iii. Longest stint was Antioch for three years; second-longest was Ephesus for two years.
 - iv. Pisidian Antioch—from Jews to Gentiles... quotes Isaiah, p. 409
- b. Now in the church at Antioch there were prophets and teachers: Barnabas, Simeon called Niger, Lucius of Cyrene, Manaen (who had been brought up with Herod the tetrarch) and Saul. While they were worshiping the Lord and fasting, the Holy Spirit said, "Set apart for me Barnabas and Saul for the work to which I have called them." So after they had fasted and prayed, they placed their hands on them and sent them off. —Acts 13:1–4
- c. So Paul went and began planting churches. Can you imagine what it would be like if Paul never left Antioch? If he just stayed and taught a great megachurch without spreading his influence, planting churches, and writing letters? So glad that he and Barney listened!
- d. Then there was this other critical moment... Paul's vision of the man of Macedonia.
- e. When they came to the border of Mysia, they tried to enter Bithynia, but the Spirit of Jesus would not allow them to. So they passed by Mysia and went down to Troas. During the night Paul had a vision of a man of Macedonia standing and begging him, "Come over to Macedonia and help us." After Paul had seen the vision, we got ready at once to leave for Macedonia, concluding that God had called us to preach the gospel to them. —Acts 16:6–10
- f. The gospel moves west (show map of Mediterranean)
- g. What if they tried to do *that* without the Holy Spirit!
 - i. Speak in languages you do not know
 - ii. Get up and walk
 - iii. Speak before the Sanhedrin
 - iv. Plan a missionary journey
- h. We are foolish today if we set out without the Holy Spirit. How are you doing on that?

3) Paul had a brilliant strategy

- a. "The two of them, sent on their way by the Holy Spirit..."
- b. Urban centers—inroads from there...
- c. Cities around the Mediterranean basin at a crossroads or at ports
- d. All of the cities that Paul planted (show map)
- e. Church planting, then move on—ten churches in ten years
- f. Jews then Gentiles—first for the Jew, then for the Gentile. Strategy, history, theology.

- g. Traveled with a small band of people who he trained—Timothy, Titus, Epaphroditus, Phoebe, Luke, Priscilla, Aquilla, Silas... They became his emissaries, messengers, and bishops.
- 4) Paul was radically inclusive
- a. Making space for Gentiles—Isaiah—Messiah would be a “light for the Gentiles.”
 - b. Peter included them, Paul included them: *Do you have to follow the Sabbath regulations? Do you have to be circumcised as an adult? Can I still eat bacon?* Paul said that you can be in Christ without requiring circumcision and food laws. Syrian Antioch experience was key here.
 - c. Council at Jerusalem where Paul faced off with Peter—the world has never been the same!
 - i. Who is a Gentile here? Who likes bacon? Yeah!
 - d. Included women in ministry
 - i. Phoebe, a deaconess
 - ii. Junia, outstanding among the apostles
 - iii. Priscilla, seminary teacher
 - iv. Euodia and Syntyche, co-laborers in the gospel
 - e. Neither Jew nor Gentile, slave nor free, male nor female... all are one in Christ!
- 5) Paul was sold out—nothing was going to stop him!
- a. To live is Christ and to die is gain. —Philippians 1:21
 - i. What would it be like if we said this?
 - b. I am not ashamed of the gospel. —Romans 1:16
 - c. A crazy work ethic
 - d. Tentmaker
 - e. Traveler
 - f. Preacher, debater, researcher
 - g. Planted ten churches
 - h. 13 of 27 New Testament books
 - i. Not the American dream plus a Sunday morning jolt
 - j. Not a gathering of people who need religion
 - k. Not a cool community of moral people that feel good
 - l. Not a “nicer” place to raise our kids and find friends
 - m. If God is for us, who can be against us? What can separate us from the love of God?

Today is St. Patrick's Day and I couldn't resist closing the message by telling you a bit about the real St. Patrick—an amazing Christian leader from the fifth century.

St. Patrick image

- Born in England, enslaved in Ireland, learned language and culture, loved people, learned to be alone with God in the fields
- Escaped slavery to England, became a priest and eventually a bishop

- Moved by the Spirit to leave his place of power and go to Ireland
- Commissioned to be a missionary to Ireland, which was totally unreached
- Willing to suffer—barbarians—*Who knows how they will treat you?*
- Traveled with twelve people
- Didn't build buildings, but set up tent communities at crossroads
- Radically included people in his community, taught them all he knew
- Moved on to the next crossroads
- Hundreds of churches and monasteries
- Copied Bibles and collected Western Literature
- Dark Ages—Ireland was untouched
- Middle Ages—swept back in and re-Christianized Europe
- Preserved Western Literature for the rest of us
- Cahill—how the Irish saved civilization; St. Patrick was the key

This is what happens when you are willing to suffer, are following the Holy Spirit, and are highly strategic, radically inclusive, and sold out!

Show Maps: Tarsus, Antioch of Syria, missionary journeys, cities Paul reached in the Mediterranean.