



Glimpses of *Grace*

A Character Study on the
Formative Years of the Apostle Paul



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Unless otherwise indicated, all Scripture quotations are taken from the King James Version of the Bible.

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INTRODUCTION

THE FORCE OF CHARACTER

Ralph Waldo Emerson once wrote that "the force of character is cumulative." This statement illustrates that often a person's successes later in life are predicated on the obstacles they conquered early in life. When studying great historical figures such as Winston Churchill, Frederick Douglas, George Washington, Marie Curie, Martin Luther King, and Abraham Lincoln it is easy to remember the highlights of their influence and impact. Each of these figures, however, were not born into greatness. They each had to overcome great challenges to find their place in the history books. By 40, Winston Churchill was largely considered a failed politician. Frederick Douglas was born a slave. Marie Curie was a female scientist and researcher during a time when few women worked in her field. She went on to be the first female to win the Nobel Prize.

In each case, these larger-than-life characters became great because they pushed forward with determination and courage when life was the hardest. Their character was formed in the heat of crucible and struggle. Often it took the toil of many years for them to achieve their greatest work.

When viewing the history of Christianity, we see multiple examples of great people formed in the crucible of opposition and conflict. One of the most influential characters in Christianity, apart from Christ himself, is the Apostle Paul. His significance cannot be overstated. Without his writings, a large part of our New Testament would be absent. Often, when we consider Paul's life, many forget the incredible obstacles he had to overcome to leave his mark on the world. He was not born into Christianity. In fact, he was born in opposition to Christianity.

Only by the touch of divine grace was Paul able to turn from his wicked past and embrace the calling of his future. With his life as a testimony, we see that God can use the worst of us to leave the best kind of mark on the world.

"For you have heard of my former conduct in Judaism, how I persecuted the church of God beyond measure and tried to destroy it. And I advanced in Judaism beyond many of my contemporaries in my own nation, being more exceedingly zealous for the traditions of my fathers. But when it pleased God, who separated me from my mother's womb and called me through His grace, to reveal His Son in me, that I might preach Him among the Gentiles" (Galatians 1:13-16, NKJV).

This series will follow Paul's life leading up to the start of his missionary journeys. As such, we will analyze and discuss the forces that shaped his eventual life and ministry. Further, we will emphasize the events that occurred before the highlight reel which show his greatest achievements. We will focus on his life leading up to his greatest Kingdom work. Understanding this, our objective will be to show that even imperfect people with mistakes, obstacles, and struggles can make an impact in the kingdom. After viewing a series of glimpses into Paul's life, we will be left with an overwhelming testament to God's grace and redemptive touch.

HOW TO USE THIS COURSE

With an objective to create a study course that is engaging, interactive, and practical the CMI Curriculum Team has added four different interactive elements into the following lessons.

- These elements are optional and each CMI Chapter Leader should personalize the lessons according to the needs of his/her unique audience or setting.

Below, leaders will find a description for each of these four elements and recommendations for their use.

PROMPTS FOR PEER-TO-PEER FEEDBACK

Often, learning environments in college emphasize group discussion and peer-to-peer feedback. With that in mind, each lesson will conclude with a series of application points and questions for discussion. These will allow lesson participants to dive deeper into lesson themes and prompt feedback from their peers.

HANDOUTS

Following each lesson, leaders will discover two-page handouts. These handouts will include a series of fill-in-the-blank points, the end-of-lesson prompts for peer-to-peer feedback, as well as the reading guide for the upcoming week.

MEDIA SLIDES

In the case that the appropriate technology is available, this course includes a series of media slides that display the main points of the lessons, Scriptures used, and key historical facts.

READING GUIDE

Included in this teaching course is a four-week reading guide created to provide participants with a weekly outline to follow. To fully experience the impact of Paul's story, it is recommended that students implement the reading guide in their own personal devotion and study. The reading guide is meant to provide your CMI chapter with reading selections for Monday–Friday that members can follow together and discuss.

When the series begins, leaders are encouraged to present the reading guide to their CMI chapter and encourage members to read through the outline together. When everyone gathers for meetings or hangouts, leaders may choose to start each lesson with a discussion of the week's reading.

READING GUIDE

GLIMPSES OF *Grace*

This series will follow Paul's life leading up to the start of his missionary journeys. As such, we will analyze and discuss the forces that shaped his eventual life and ministry. We will focus on his life leading up to his greatest Kingdom work. Understanding this, our objective will be to show that even imperfect people with mistakes, obstacles, and struggles can make an impact in the kingdom.

The following reading guide follows the outline of the four lessons and is meant to provide a variety of selections for reading and study from Monday to Friday of each week. The estimated reading time for each day is 10-15 minutes.

WEEK 1 - IN THE BEGINNING

- Day 1 – Galatians 1:11-14, 1 Timothy 1:12-13
- Day 2 – Acts 22:1-5, Acts 23:6
- Day 3 – Acts 26:4-11, Romans 8:1-27
- Day 4 – Acts 9:1-19, Romans 8:28-39
- Day 5 – Philippians 3

WEEK 2 - THE TRIUMPH OF GRACE

- Day 1 – Galatians 1:15-24, 1 Timothy 1:14-17
- Day 2 – Acts 22:6-16, Romans 5:6-11
- Day 3 – Romans 3:20-24, James 4:6-10
- Day 4 – Ephesians 4
- Day 5 – Philippians 3:14-16, Romans 1:1-5

WEEK 3 - A MINISTRY BEGINS

- Day 1 – Acts 9:20-22, Acts 22:17-21
- Day 2 – Acts 26:12-18, Colossians 2:6-15
- Day 3 – 2 Corinthians 11:16-33
- Day 4 – 2 Corinthians 12:7-10, 2 Corinthians 4:1-6
- Day 5 – Acts 13-14 (Paul's first missionary journey with Barnabas)

WEEK 4 - HIS LEGACY, YOUR STORY

- Day 1 – Acts 15:36-41, Acts 16-18 (Paul's second missionary journey)
- Day 2 – Acts 18-21 (Paul's third missionary journey)
- Day 3 – Acts 22-23 (Paul arrested in Jerusalem and sent to Caesarea on the coast)
- Day 4 – Acts 24-26 (Paul's testimony before Gentile rulers in Caesarea)
- Day 5 – Acts 27-28 (Paul sent by ship to Rome)

LESSON 1 //

IN THE BEGINNING

In lesson 1, we start at the beginning of Paul's life and discover what he was like before his conversion. In the beginning, he is presented as a man of great ambition and passion who has committed himself to fight against the church.

CAN GOD USE A PERSON WITH A PAST?

We've all got a past. We've all got skeletons in the closet and memories that we want to keep buried in the recesses of our minds. Often we think our past defines us and dictates our future. It's easy to see God doing amazing things in the lives of our friends or mentors and think that we're stuck on the outside looking in, relegated forever to the spectator's bench.

The big question of this series is this: "Can God use a person with a past?" To ask it another way, "Can God use a person with regrets?" Or, we even may ask, "Can God use a person who is obviously imperfect?" These are all valid questions because if God is really God, then He must be able to take a broken vessel and put it back together again. If He really is the magnificent Creator of all things who has no limitations, then He must be able to touch a life that is far from Him and bring redeemable potential to the surface.

With these kinds of questions in mind, there is no better life to discuss than that of apostle Paul. Viewing his life, we find an answer to the question, "Can God really use a person with a past?" We see in his life what God can do with a person with regrets and we observe the redeemable potential that He can bring out of a chaotic past. Luke, the writer of Acts, makes it clear in his narrative of the early church that, before his conversion, Paul's reputation was violent and antagonistic towards believers. Church members in Jerusalem feared him. Even after his conversion, the believers in Jerusalem struggled to trust him. There were some who were never able to accept the fact that God had called Paul to be an apostle. Constantly, in the epistles, we see Paul defending his place as a leader in the church. Despite these challenges and despite his storied past, Paul would go down in history as one of the greatest Christians to ever walk the earth. But his achievements only came after years of great toil and sacrifice.

Not only do we find in Paul a worthy model of Christian living and effective ministry, but we observe in Paul the far-reaching power of God's grace. His testimony gives hope to all of us and shows the world what can happen when God's redemptive hand reaches down to touch the human heart. Throughout the four lessons of *Glimpses of Grace*, we will observe the formative years in Paul's life and see how, through it all, grace conquers all.

IN THE BEGINNING

We all have an "In the Beginning" season in our lives. Perhaps this season represents the period of our lives of which we are not proud. It may also represent what we've had to overcome to get where we are now – the struggles, the adversities, and the trials. In Paul's life, his "beginning season" represents who he was before his conversion. Though he was at the top of his game in many respects, he was far from God. Though famous among his peers and climbing the ladder of achievement, he was lost, and he was driven by sinful appetites. Observing Paul's "In the Beginning" season, we may rightly use descriptions such as anger, religious obsession, brutality, and unbridled ambition. In his Jewish upbringing, he was trained to debate minute matters of the Law and it took him no time to excel at argument and persuasion.

As an adolescent, Paul was sent to Jerusalem and studied under the legendary Hebrew rabbi, Gamaliel. He spoke of his prominent education and upbringing in his defense before the Jewish mob in Jerusalem in Acts 22:3. To those listening, he declared he was, "brought up in this city at the feet of Gamaliel, taught according to the perfect manner of the law of the fathers, and was zealous toward God." Under Gamaliel, Paul would have been trained to dissect a text to find scores of possible meanings. As Christian biographer John Pollock points out, Paul would have "learned to debate in the question-and-answer style known to the ancient world as diatribe, and to expound, for a rabbi was not only part preacher but also lawyer, ready to prosecute or defend those accused of breaking the sacred Law."¹

It was at this stage of Paul's life that his command of the Scriptures would have been perfected. This mastery is reflected later in life in his thirteen New Testament letters, in which his quotations from and allusions to Old Testament Scriptures come to over 250. It is assumed that in his letters when quoting from Old Testament accounts, he did so from the reservoir of his memory.

Interestingly, it was around the time that Paul was sent to Jerusalem that Jesus traveled to Jerusalem with His parents for the annual Passover celebration (Luke 3:41-52). Jesus was twelve on the day when He stood in the temple and astonished the Jewish teachers with His wisdom. As Jesus "increased in wisdom and stature, and in favor with God and man," Paul was on his own track to prominence. Initially, the forces of their lives were like two rivers flowing in opposite directions. It wasn't until later when they were both in their thirties that the current of providence joined the two.

THE LIFE OF A PHARISEE

It is beneficial in our study of Paul to understand the unique character of a Pharisee. Leading up to the first century, two influential Jewish parties had arisen – Pharisees and Sadducees. These parties were political as well as religious. During the intertestamental period (the period between the Old and New Testaments), ruling power among Jews switched between these two groups, but, eventually, the Pharisees surpassed the Sadducees in number and became the more influential party. As we see in the New Testament, there were two main differences between these groups. On a theological level, the Pharisees believed in heaven and hell and advocated a resurrection after death. They also believed that Jews would be judged strictly according to their adherence to the Torah (to the point that they created a series of extra laws to ensure the proper implementation of Scripture). The Sadducees, on the other hand, did not believe in a resurrection after death nor in a coming Messiah.

The word "Pharisee" signifies one who is separated. The very name means separatist. The word applied to them admirably, for they were separate from the Sadducees, separate from the foreigner, and separate from all that was not Jewish. Ultimately, their name implied a hatred of Hellenism. They made no compromise with Gentile philosophy or practice. These views are expressed in a phrase that was common among first century Pharisees, "He who teaches his son Greek is accursed like him who keeps pigs."

Sadducees were on the opposite end of the religious spectrum. As a party, they had no objection to learning and speaking Greek. In fact, they were known to embrace Hellenism and represented "the party of moderation." Largely, they viewed their Pharisical counterparts as heretical fanatics.

- These differences provide depth of context and would have implications throughout Paul's life. They illustrate the miracle of his conversion and his calling to the Gentiles. They also explain why Paul was so antagonistic towards Christianity in the beginning.

¹ Pollock, John. Apostle (Colorado Springs, CO: David C Cook, 2012), 2.

Paul came of age and into prominence within a religious party that viewed all others with malice and animosity. It's no wonder Jesus looked at the scribes and Pharisees and called them "whitewashed tombs" which were beautifully adorned but full of dead men's bones (Matthew 23:27).

OBSERVATIONS

Viewing this early stage of Paul's life, we are left with two observations. Firstly, he was the epitome of success in his generation. In was in Jerusalem during his early twenties that he made a name for himself as an influential and zealous teacher of the Law.

"I advanced in Judaism beyond many of my contemporaries in my own nation, being more exceedingly zealous for the traditions of my fathers" (Galatians 1:14).

His accomplishments brought with them a certain amount of fame. It's no stretch to say that he was the guy everyone wanted to be like. He was the guy everyone wanted to hang out with. To be friends with Paul was to be friends with the most well-known religious leader in Judaism.

Paul gained such a reputation that he eventually participated in the great ruling body among Jews, the Sanhedrin Council. It is recorded that Paul "cast his vote" against Christians and condemned them to death (Acts 26:10). Whether this was accomplished while serving on the Council or by using his influence as a Jewish leader, he directly opposed the followers of Christ. In the beginning, he leveraged his fame and used it to oppose the church and its influence.

A second observation we can make of Paul in his early days is that he was incredibly smart and gifted. Not every Jewish student had the pleasure or privilege to be trained under the tutelage of the great Gamaliel. Paul's education would have given him a high level of confidence and even arrogance. He was trained to notice error in others. He could detect when the Law was misinterpreted by local teachers in the synagogue. Using our imaginations, we can image Paul sitting in the back of the class and correcting the teacher – and being right in doing so. He was that kind of guy. When he walked into a room or stood to speak, everyone listened.

Though it is true that Paul was both famous among his peers and highly intelligent, he was incredibly lost. In this, we see that just because a person seems to "have it all together" does not mean that he/she is right with God or walking the right path. Often, when a person gets a taste of success he/she loses a grip on Biblical virtues such as morality, character, and brotherly love.

When viewing Paul's past, we see a man with deep-seated prejudices. He was raised in a culture that despised outsiders. Understanding the context of his history, we can rightly say that he was taught to hate those who were not like him.

CONCLUSION

As Paul was rising to the top of his game, a new system of belief was arising in Jerusalem. This new faith was centered on a carpenter from Nazareth named Jesus, who was declared by His followers to be the promised Messiah. In time, these Christ-followers, or Christians, began to change things in the city. Soon, large amounts of people began to turn away from the religion of the Jews.

- Paul viewed this new system of faith as a threat to his way of life. Viewing the rise of Christianity, his ambitions and passions turned dark and he committed his life to opposing this new faith.

As Acts 9 opens, Paul has reached the summit of his evil ambition. We observe him "breathing out threatenings and slaughter against the disciples of the Lord" (Acts 9:1). Later in life, in his first letter

to Timothy, he vividly portrays his efforts to destroy the church. Describing himself, he uses the words blasphemer, persecutor, and injurious. (See I Timothy 1:13.) These words describe a man who was driven by a zealous sense of intolerance. He was not content to speak against Christians from a distance. Rather, he made it his objective to seek them out and destroy their cause. In his pursuit to purge the land, he became the primary driver of Christian persecution in the first century.

Taking advantage of his allegiance to the High Priest, Paul sought letters of endorsement which gave his murderous cause legal standing throughout Palestine. Upon hearing of a growing number of believers in Damascus, he gathered a group of followers loyal to his cause and started the journey north. It was on the road to Damascus that his life changed forever.

Though Paul thought he was in control of his life as he traveled to Damascus, God was, in fact, directing his footsteps and bringing him to a point of faith.

PROMPTS FOR PEER-TO-PEER FEEDBACK

- This lesson discusses the “In the Beginning” season which represents what life is like before a person finds faith in Christ. What was it like in the beginning for you? What observations can you make about your own past before you experienced a new birth in Christ?
- After his conversion, Paul had to overcome the prejudices of his past. Why is it unique that God called him to be an apostle and missionary to the Gentiles? How can we apply this reality in our own lives?
- In Paul’s life, the road to Damascus represents his “road to conversion.” Though he thought he was in complete control, God was, in fact, using his decisions to bring him to the point where he would humble himself and accept the truth about Jesus. In your own life, what events or experiences were used to bring you to a place of conversion? Looking back, can you see the hand of God working in your life even while you were far from Him?
- Have you ever had a hard time overcoming the reputation gained by actions in your past? Explain how. What advice would you give a person who is struggling to overcome the mistakes, failures, and sins of his/her past?

STUDENT HANDOUT // LESSON 1

IN THE BEGINNING

KEY POINTS

The word "Pharisee" signifies one who is _____.

Sadducees were on the opposite end of the religious spectrum. As a party, they represented "the party of _____." Largely, they viewed their Pharisical counterparts as heretical fanatics.

- These differences provide depth of context and would have implications throughout Paul's life. They illustrate the miracle of his conversion and his calling to the Gentiles. They also explain why Paul was so antagonistic towards Christianity in the beginning.

As Paul was rising to the top of his game, a new system of belief was arising in Jerusalem. This new faith was centered on a carpenter from Nazareth named _____, who was declared by His followers to be the promised _____.

- Paul viewed this new system of faith as a threat to his way of life. Viewing the rise of Christianity, his ambitions and passions turned dark and he committed his life to opposing this new faith.

PROMPTS FOR PEER-TO-PEER FEEDBACK

- This lesson discusses the "In the Beginning" season which represents what life is like before a person finds faith in Christ. What was it like in the beginning for you? What observations can you make about your own past before you experienced a new birth in Christ?
- After his conversion, Paul had to overcome the prejudices of his past. Why is it unique that God called him to be an apostle and missionary to the Gentiles? How can we apply this reality in our own lives?
- In Paul's life, the road to Damascus represents his "road to conversion." Though he thought he was in complete control, God was, in fact, using his decisions to bring him to the point where he would humble himself and accept the truth about Jesus. In your own life, what events or experiences were used to bring you to a place of conversion? Looking back, can you see the hand of God working in your life even while you were far from Him?
- Have you ever had a hard time overcoming the reputation gained by actions in your past? Explain how. What advice would you give a person who is struggling to overcome the mistakes, failures, and sins of his/her past?

WEEK 1 READING GUIDE

DAY 1 – Galatians 1:11-14, 1 Timothy 1:12-13

DAY 2 – Acts 22:1-5, Acts 23:6

DAY 3 – Acts 26:4-11, Romans 8:1-27

DAY 4 – Acts 9:1-19, Romans 8:28-39

DAY 5 – Philippians 3

LESSON 2

THE TRIUMPH OF GRACE

In lesson 2, we view Paul coming face-to-face with a bright light from heaven while traveling to Damascus. In this experience, he loses his sight and is forced to hobble his way into the city. After three days, God sends Ananias to guide him to salvation.

BEFORE YOU BEGIN

- Consider starting the lesson with a brief discussion of the word, "grace." Go around the room and ask the following questions: How do you define grace? How is Romans 5:8 a good example of God's grace? Where can we go to find real-world examples of grace? How should we show grace to each other?

THE ROAD TO DAMASCUS

The distance between Jerusalem and Damascus is about 150 miles and it would have taken Paul at least six days on foot or by mule. A considerable portion of the journey lies across the desert and before the dry heat of the sun. By most accounts, we can determine that Paul had never been to the city before. As the capital of the province of Syria, Damascus was situated on a common trading route used by those traveling from the Fertile Crescent to the coast. During the first century, there was a substantial Jewish population living in the city, so it would have been a good refuge for Jewish converts fleeing the persecution of Jerusalem.

Luke records three different accounts of Paul's Damascus road experience. The first is found in Acts 9 and the next two are found later in Paul's life when he recounts his conversion before the Jewish mob in Acts 22:5-11 and before King Agrippa on the way to Rome in Acts 26:11-18.

"I AM JESUS."

In Scripture, we discover that it was at the end of his journey, with Damascus not far away, when a bright light suddenly burst forth from heaven. As Paul fell to the earth in shock and fear, a voice began to speak. "Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting Me?" Recognizing the voice as being divine and having authority, Paul asks the obvious question. "Who are you, Lord?"²

As Paul lies flat on the ground with his face in the dirt, the heavenly voice reveals its identity. "I am Jesus, whom you are persecuting. It is hard for you to kick against the goads."

It is at this point when revelation begins flooding Paul's mind. For years leading up to this point, he has lived with the assumption that Jesus was simply a carpenter from Nazareth who, through false teaching, had gained a large following. In his mind, it was blasphemous to hear Christians proclaim Jesus to be equal with God. As did most of the Jews of his day, he expected a Messiah with a sword in his hand who would cast down the powers of Rome and assert his kingdom on earth.

This statement no doubt brought a weight down on Paul's heart. By heavenly means, Jesus had spoken directly to him. Not only that, Jesus asserted His authority on behalf of the believers that Paul had targeted for death and destruction. Paul knew the full implications of these words.

² Scripture quotations in this section taken from the New King James Version.

It's fascinating that Jesus makes mention of Paul "kicking against the goads," or as the King James Version states, "kicking against the pricks." In that day, a goad was a type of stick with a sharpened point used by a shepherd or herdsmen to guide and direct livestock. When plowing a field, an ox goad was used to prick an ox to point it in a predetermined direction. If obstinate, the ox would kick against its master and leave wounds deep in its flesh. Using this phrase, Jesus illuminated to Paul what had been transpiring beneath the surface of his life. Up to this moment, God had been directing his footsteps. Divinity had been writing upon his heart and he had fought against it. His pride and human will had been opposing the touch of his creator. As John Pollock illustrates,

Saul had never admitted to himself that he had felt pricks of a goad as he raged against Stephen and his disciples. But now, instantaneously, he was shatteringly aware that he had been fighting Jesus—and fighting himself, his conscience, his powerlessness, the darkness and chaos in his own soul.³

Long before this moment, the revelation of Jesus had been calling and prodding him. As it has been so aptly written, "There is a divinity that shapes our ends, and it was making him a polished shaft for God's quiver, though he did not know it."⁴

Could it be that as Paul fought against the rapid growth of Christianity he was fighting against the error in his own judgment? Could it be that deep down he refused to accept that he was wrong? Or, was it that he was fighting against his own humanity and the realization that his years of study and discipline had left him empty?

- **As God calls each of us, He will use certain experiences and moments to prod our hearts and imprint on the fabric of our spiritual destiny.**

It was a short time before his Damascus journey that Paul sat as an observer in the Hall of Polished Stones as Stephen gave his defense before the Sanhedrin Council. He had witnessed the visible glow on Stephen's face as he masterfully preached. He had listened to Stephen's words when he declared,

"Howbeit the most High dwelleth not in temples made with hands; as saith the prophet, Heaven is my throne, and earth is my footstool: what house will ye build me? saith the Lord: or what is the place of my rest?" (Acts 7:48-49).

Of these words, a certain phrase rang true in Paul's heart.

The most High dwelleth not in temples made with hands...

Nearly twenty years later, while standing on Mars' Hill, Paul would use this phrase in his own preaching.

"Ye men of Athens, I perceive that in all things ye are too superstitious. For as I passed by, and beheld your devotions, I found an altar with this inscription, To The Unknown God. Whom therefore ye ignorantly worship, him declare I unto you. God that made the world and all things therein, seeing that he is Lord of heaven and earth, dwelleth not in temples made with hands"
(Acts 17:22-24).

Perhaps it was this statement, first spoken by Stephen, that God used as an instrument to prod Paul's

³ Pollock, John. Apostle (Colorado Springs, CO: David C Cook, 2012), 34.

⁴ Stalker, James. The Life of St. Paul (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1983), 20.

heart. We know he remembered it because on multiple occasions in his epistles, and in his preaching, he made mention of "a temple not made with human hands." Nothing made by human hands gives us access to eternity. It was this revelation, that Jesus came to redeem the human heart, that revolutionized Paul's theology.

"RISE, STAND ON YOUR FEET."

As Paul lay prostrate on the Damascus road, fresh thoughts burned in his mind. Trembling and astonished, he asked, "Lord, what do you want me to do?" Jesus replied, "Arise and go into the city, and you will be told what you must do." The men who were with Paul heard the voice but saw no one.

Later in Acts, as Paul describes the events surrounding his conversion to King Agrippa, he reveals that Jesus in those moments called him to preach to the Gentiles.

"But rise, and stand upon thy feet: for I have appeared unto thee for this purpose, to make thee a minister and a witness both of these things which thou hast seen, and of those things in the which I will appear unto thee; Delivering thee from the people, and from the Gentiles, unto whom now I send thee, To open their eyes, and to turn them from darkness to light, and from the power of Satan unto God, that they may receive forgiveness of sins, and inheritance among them which are sanctified by faith that is in me" (Acts 26:16-18, NKJV).

As Paul knelt and then stood to his feet, he realized that he was blind. Following the word of the Lord, he made his way into Damascus. Rather than ride into the city as a brave inquisitor sent from the high court of Jerusalem, he walked into the city as a stricken man, trembling, groping, and clinging to the hands of his companions. For three days, he drank no water and ate no food. For three days, he sought to comprehend all that burned in his mind. For three days, he saw nothing but darkness.

His previous life, which he had built by human efforts, fell in fragments at his feet. For three days, everything he had made for himself came crashing down. He realized that as he had been fighting against Christianity, he had actually been fighting against God. Not only did he wrestle with the sudden revelations of Christ's deity, he wrestled with the undeniable call that Christ had placed in his heart.

As Paul prayed, the Lord visited a disciple living in Damascus named Ananias. In a vision, Ananias heard the voice of God call his name. Having been called to attention, he replied, "Here I am, Lord." Then, he was given specific instructions to search for Paul in the house of one called Judas on the street called Straight. To this day, Straight street runs east to west in the old quarters of Damascus. In the first century, this was the main street in town and no doubt where travelers lodged when visiting the city.

Initially, Ananias was hesitant to follow the Lord because this Saul of Tarsus was one who had a frightful reputation among Christians. Yet, the Lord assured Ananias that Paul was expecting him. Still, Ananias was fearful knowing that Paul had come to the city to seek out and imprison the believers.

"Then Ananias answered, Lord, I have heard by many of this man, how much evil he hath done to thy saints at Jerusalem: And here he hath authority from the chief priests to bind all that call on thy name. But the Lord said unto him, Go thy way: for he is a chosen vessel unto me, to bear my name before the Gentiles, and kings, and the children of Israel: For I will shew him how great things he must suffer for my name's sake" (Acts 9:13-16).

With specific directions given to him by the Spirit, Ananias left his own house and walked to the street called Straight and located the house of Judas. Though Paul had come to the city possibly to take his life, Ananias greeted him as a brother in Christ.

"And Ananias went his way, and entered into the house; and putting his hands on him said, Brother Saul, the Lord, even Jesus, that appeared unto thee in the way as thou camest, hath sent me, that thou mightest receive thy sight, and be filled with the Holy Ghost" (Acts 9:17).

After coming to a place of repentance and acknowledging the error of our ways, it is only natural to seek a greater experience with God. After spending three days in mental agony, Paul was an open and ready vessel. With the laying on of hands, Ananias prayed for Paul and he was filled with the Holy Ghost.

- As the Spirit filled his weary soul, his sight returned. From that moment forward, he would see the world through a new lens. His past accomplishments or religious heritage were no longer reasons for personal glory. In the triumph of divine grace, a new life had been born that sought nothing but the glory of Jesus Christ.

This would cause Paul to later write:

"But what things were gain to me, those I counted loss for Christ. Yea doubtless, and I count all things but loss for the excellency of the knowledge of Christ Jesus my Lord: for whom I have suffered the loss of all things, and do count them but dung, that I may win Christ, and be found in him" (Philippians 3:7-10).

With his sight restored, Paul was challenged by Ananias to be baptized.

"And now why tarriest thou? arise, and be baptized, and wash away thy sins, calling on the name of the Lord" (Acts 22:16).

What a moment it must have been for Ananias to baptize a man that had previously made him and the larger Christian community fearful! What a moment it must have been for Paul to discover grace and acceptance by a man that only days before he had never met!

After eating and restoring his strength, Paul spent "a number of days" with the community of disciples in Damascus. He talked with them. He ate with them. He prayed with them. He was not their enemy, but a brother and a fellow believer. By the work of the Spirit, his soul had been restored. Though he would carry immense regret throughout his adult life and be haunted by his actions and deeds as a Pharisee, he was determined to "endure afflictions, do the work of an evangelist, and make full proof of his ministry" (II Timothy 4:5).

"This is a faithful saying and worthy of all acceptance, that Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners, of whom I am chief" (I Timothy 1:15, NKJV).

"And I thank Christ Jesus our Lord, who hath enabled me, for that he counted me faithful, putting me in the ministry" (II Timothy 1:12, NKJV).

CONCLUSION

Throughout Paul's writings, the word "grace" is used 101 different times.⁵ Grace was such an essential part of his thinking and theology that he began all his letters with a grace statement as a greeting and ended all his letters with a grace farewell. No other New Testament writer used the word grace like Paul did. When translated back into the original Greek, the word illustrates the free and unmerited favor of God. It represents divine blessing and favor that cannot be earned or purchased by good deeds.

⁵ This number does not include the use of the word "grace" in the book of Hebrews (which a few believe Paul may have written), which would bring the total number up to 109.

When viewing his own life, Paul understood that he did not deserve the blessing of God upon his life. He had done nothing to earn it. Only by grace was he saved and called into the ministry. It was also this concept of grace that drove his evangelistic passion. He understood that as he walked into a city, there was enough grace available to save its residents – no matter its degree of immorality, vice, or idol worship. He believed that despite the degree of sin, God was able to redeem, restore, and renew the heart of every man, woman, and child. (See Romans 5:20.) As Paul states in 2 Corinthians 12:9, God's grace is sufficient to redeem any and every weakness. As grace triumphed in the first century, it can triumph today in every sinful heart. Through grace, we all have hope.

PROMPTS FOR PEER-TO-PEER FEEDBACK

- Why do you think Jesus caused Paul's eyes to be blind for three days after his Damascus Road experience? What influence did this affliction have upon him?
- The story of Paul's conversion can serve as a witnessing tool and a testimony to the impact of God's grace. How would you use Paul's story to encourage a friend that may be struggling to overcome the choices of his/her past?
- Have you ever ignored a divine prompting or prodding and later regretted it? Explain how.
- Why do you think Stephen's statement about God living in a temple not made with human hands was so impactful to Paul? In your opinion, why was this statement so memorable?

STUDENT HANDOUT // LESSON 2

THE TRIUMPH OF GRACE

KEY POINTS

The distance between Jerusalem and Damascus is about _____ miles and it would have taken Paul at least six days on foot or by mule.

In Paul's day, a goad was a type of stick with a _____ used by a shepherd or herdsmen to guide and direct livestock. When plowing a field, an ox goad was used to prick an ox to point it in a predetermined direction.

- As God calls each of us, He will use certain experiences and moments to prod our hearts and imprint on the fabric of our spiritual destiny.

After coming to a place of repentance and acknowledging the error of our ways, it is only natural to seek a greater experience with God. After spending three days in mental agony, Paul was an open and ready vessel. With the laying on of hands, Ananias prayed for Paul and he was filled with _____.

- As the Spirit filled his weary soul, his sight returned. From that moment forward, he would see the world through a new lens. His past accomplishments or religious heritage were no longer reasons for personal glory. In the triumph of divine grace, a new life had been born that sought nothing but the glory of Jesus Christ.

Throughout Paul's writings, the word "grace" is used _____ different times

PROMPTS FOR PEER-TO-PEER FEEDBACK

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- Have you ever ignored a divine prompting or prodding and later regretted it? Explain how.
- Why do you think Stephen's statement about God living in a temple not made with human hands was so impactful to Paul? In your opinion, why was this statement so memorable?

WEEK 2 READING GUIDE

DAY 1 – Galatians 1:15-24, 1 Timothy 1:14-17

DAY 2 – Acts 22:6-16, Romans 5:6-11

DAY 3 – Romans 3:20-24, James 4:6-10

DAY 4 – Ephesians 4

DAY 5 – Philippians 3:14-16, Romans 1:1-5

LESSON 3

A MINISTRY BEGINS

In lesson 3, we observe Paul struggling to find acceptance among members of the church, whom he had previously worked so hard to oppose. Regardless, his ministry quickly develops and, after being supported by Barnabas, he is accepted among the disciples.

ALL THINGS MADE NEW

The biblical text states that Paul “straightway” or immediately began to preach Christ in the synagogues after his conversion. His newfound revelation that Jesus was the Son of God was not something he could contain. The more he preached, the more he increased in strength. Building upon his prior training in the law, his skill increased rapidly.

“But Saul increased all the more in strength, and confounded the Jews who dwelt in Damascus, proving that this Jesus is the Christ” (Acts 9:22, NKJV).

The Jews that listened to him in the synagogue were amazed. Those who were formerly his allies were now confounded by his preaching. The Christians who had fled his reign of terror in Jerusalem could hardly believe that this was the same man who had worked so feverishly to destroy them.

It was Paul who later wrote that, “If any man be in Christ, he is a new creature: old things are passed away; behold, all things become new” (II Corinthians 5:17). He had experienced this truth firsthand. In only a short time, God had transformed his heart to reflect a love for his fellow man. Soon after his conversion, he began preaching and discovered that despite his troubled past, God had a great plan for his future.

Growing up as a Jewish child, he was called by the name “Saul.” In time, as he began to embrace his ministry to the Gentiles, he was identified by the Greek translation of his name – Paul. In the narrative of Acts, Luke switches the use of his name, from Saul to Paul, on his first missionary journey.⁶

FROM THE DESERT TO THE FISH BASKET

At this juncture, there is evidence that Paul spent three years in Arabia in quiet reflection, prayer, and study. (See Galatians 1:16-17.) Being a terminus of one of the great spice routes from Arabia to the Horn of Africa, Damascus hosted scores of merchants and traders.⁷ Being the son of an important trading house in Tarsus, Paul would not have had trouble finding passage outside of the city.

Both Moses and Jesus spent time in the wilderness before starting their ministry. It must have taken time for Paul to consider the commission he had received on the road to Damascus. Desiring to think through his faith, he found solace in the desert and spent a lot of time communing with Christ. By nature, he was a thinker and it was not enough for him to experience anything. He also had to comprehend it.

After a period in the wilderness, Paul returned to Damascus and began preaching powerfully in the synagogue. Soon, Jewish leaders turned on him and sought to kill him. To prevent his escape, the Jews sought help from the governor of Syria and sentries were posted to guard the city gates. (See II Corinthians 11:32-32.) They stood day and night to ensure that Paul would not be allowed to leave

⁶ For the sake of simplicity, this series utilizes the name of Paul throughout.

⁷ Pollock, Apostle, 43.

unnoticed. Having been accepted by the Christians in Damascus, a plan was enacted to secure his escape. Deep into the night, they put Paul in a basket and lowered him through a window down the city wall.

Is not this image ironic? Paul, the once great Pharisee who had achieved more than most men do in multiple lifetimes, is lowered down the city wall in a basket used for scraps and fish. Though he had grown up in prominence, he is now depending on the help and support of others. Inching closer to the ground in a smelly basket, his life was truly in the hands of his companions.

- We see in this experience God teaching Paul, that without the assistance of fellow believers he is completely helpless.

Some, in their description of Paul, paint a picture of a man traveling through deserts and mountains and cities alone and solitary. Studying Biblical accounts, we see that this is far from the truth. God taught Paul early on that he needed the church as much as the church needed him. As soon as he started his ministry, a contract for his head was issued by the Jews who previously groveled at his feet. The hunter soon became the hunted. The fear and humiliation of having his fame crushed by intense criticism and opposition must have been immense. Writing about this early season of Paul's ministry, Dr. Charles Swindoll says,

It was all part of God's plan for his life to break his independent spirit. For as soon as the tables turned, people came to his rescue. His need forced the once-independent Saul to depend on a nameless group of faithful disciples to rescue him from certain death, by means of a basket hanging from a rope.⁸

In his epistles, Paul often reflects on the many people who prayed for him and blessed him throughout his travels. In Romans 16, he makes note of over 30 different fellow workers who supported him through the highs and lows of his life. This is evidence that his great ministry was largely a team effort. He was only able to accomplish what he did because he did not work alone. R. C. Lenski writes that Paul's flight from Damascus "forced him into the long wait in which he fully learned he was nothing, that his mightiest asset was utter weakness, weakness which enabled God to do everything with him and through him."⁹

Often, God must strip away the habits of the past to bring us into our promise. Before Paul could rise to his place as an apostle and missionary, he had to learn to work together with other believers. Effective ministry can only be fulfilled in the company of good people and with those of like-minded faith.

BARNABAS, SON OF ENCOURAGEMENT

After escaping Damascus, Paul traveled south and returned to Jerusalem. Settling into the city, he attempted to join the company of the disciples. However, his old reputation remained intact and many Christians remained fearful of him. Some were even suspicious and did not believe that he had been converted. It's likely that some believers had suffered at his hand and were unnerved by his arrival.

Seeing Paul's predicament, a church leader named Barnabas came to his aide and defended his conversion to the disciples.

"But Barnabas took him and brought him to the apostles. And he declared to them how he had seen the Lord on the road, and that He had spoken to him, and how he had preached boldly at Damascus in the name of Jesus" (Acts 9:27, NKJV).

⁸ J. Charles Swindoll. Paul: Man of Grace and Grit (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 2002) 66-67.

⁹ R.C. Lenski. The Interpretation of St. Paul's First and Second Epistle to the Corinthians (Columbus, OH: Wartburg Press, 1937) 1287.

In this verse, we discover that it was Barnabas who took Paul and presented him to the disciples. Doing so, he advocated for Paul and recommended his ministry. This was the same Barnabas who had previously sold his land and gave the profits to the church. He was described as a "son of consolation" which can also be interpreted, "son of comfort" or "son of encouragement." Only by the consolation, comfort, and encouragement of Barnabas was Paul accepted into the circle of disciples and church leaders. It was during this time that Paul spent over two weeks conversing with Peter.

Being zealous, as he had always been, Paul preached boldly in the streets and disputed with Grecian Jews in the synagogues. At this stage, it becomes apparent that he developed a desire to see Jerusalem turn to Christ. He carried this burden throughout his ministry. Even with a plot against his life unfolding, he fought to preach Jesus to his countrymen, the Jews.

With Jewish forces breathing down his neck, Paul went to the temple to pray. In prayer, the Lord spoke and directed him to leave the city.

"Now it happened, when I returned to Jerusalem and was praying in the temple, that I was in a trance and saw Him saying to me, 'Make haste and get out of Jerusalem quickly, for they will not receive your testimony concerning Me.' So I said, 'Lord, they know that in every synagogue I imprisoned and beat those who believe on You. And when the blood of Your martyr Stephen was shed, I also was standing by consenting to his death, and guarding the clothes of those who were killing him.' Then He said to me, 'Depart, for I will send you far from here to the Gentiles.'"
(Acts 22:17-21, NKJV).

Leaving Jerusalem, he journeyed to Caesarea on the coast and purchased passage on a ship sailing north to Tarsus.

CONCLUSION

Though it is not recorded directly by Luke, we gather that Paul spent at least five years in Tarsus. In Galatians 1:21-24 we discover that he preached faith in Christ throughout his home province of Cilicia and neighboring Syria. However, no sermon is recorded, and we do not know what exactly this short period entailed. We can guess of the trials he referred to in 2 Corinthians 11:23-27 took place during this time, mainly because the ministry described in Acts does not accommodate all of them. Paul mentions, for example, five lashings by Jews, none of which are described in Acts. As New Testament Scholar Robert Picirilli notes, "Such lashings were a common form of synagogue discipline. No doubt Paul made persistent efforts in the synagogues in his home area to turn his hearers to faith in Jesus as Messiah and Redeemer, and no doubt he was subjected to discipline for his efforts."¹⁰

Thus, we see a man who would play a large part in the story of the church hidden away from the attention of the world. In these years in Tarsus, we see Paul in the shadows. As God was unveiling a plan to evangelize the world, he was left to wait.

- In this, we see a larger principle expressed throughout Scripture which shows that often before a person's efforts are visible and known by others, they must endure the affliction of isolation. It is in these quiet seasons that God produces a depth of character, courage, and patience.

In one of Paul's earliest letters, he wrote, "And let us not be weary in well doing: for in due season we shall reap, if we faint not" (Galatians 6:9). Perhaps, he learned this principle as Jews laid stripes on his back during his hidden years in Tarsus.

¹⁰ Picirilli, Paul the Apostle, 60.

PROMPTS FOR PEER-TO-PEER FEEDBACK

- Often, when viewing the life of a great leader whom we admire, we do not realize that he/she may have had to overcome great challenges to gain his/her place in the history books. Paul started his ministry in the desert and in a “fish basket.” His life is a testament to the fact that adversity does not always indicate failure or weakness. Rather, it may show that God is forming the fabric of our lives for His glory. How should this truth impact how we view our own “hidden years” of difficulty? What can this teach those who are in a challenging season of life?
- In the beginning, Barnabas played a key role in advocating for Paul and helped him gain acceptance in the church. How can we use the example of Barnabas in shaping how we treat or accept those who are new or young in faith? Who served as a Barnabas to you when you were young in faith? What did he/she do or say that encouraged you? Why was it important for Paul to learn to depend on and work well with other believers?
- What do you think drove Paul to spend three years in the desert of Arabia? Why was this necessary to the development of his later ministry?

STUDENT HANDOUT // LESSON 3

A MINISTRY BEGINS

KEY POINTS

It was Paul who later wrote that, "If any man be in Christ, he is a _____: old things are passed away; behold, all things become _____" (2 Corinthians 5:17). He had experienced this truth firsthand. In only a short time, God had transformed his heart to reflect a love for his fellow man. Soon after his conversion, he began preaching and discovered that despite his troubled past, God had a great plan for his future.

After a period in the wilderness, Paul returned to Damascus and began preaching powerfully in the synagogue. Soon, Jewish leaders turned on him and sought to kill him. Having been accepted by the Christians in Damascus, a plan was enacted to secure his escape. Deep into the night, they put Paul in a _____ and lowered him through a window down the city wall.

- We see in this experience God teaching Paul, through a series of circumstances, that without the assistance of fellow believers he is completely helpless.

In Romans 16, Paul makes note of over _____ different fellow workers who supported him through the highs and lows of his life.

After escaping Damascus, Paul traveled south and returned to Jerusalem. Settling into the city, he attempted to join the company of the disciples. However, his old reputation remained intact and many Christians remained fearful of him. Seeing Paul's predicament, a church leader named _____ came to his aide and defended his conversion to the disciples.

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- In the beginning, Barnabas played a key role in advocating for Paul and helped him gain acceptance in the church. How can we use the example of Barnabas in shaping how we treat or accept those who are new or young in faith? Who served as a Barnabas to you when you were young in faith? What did he/she do or say that encouraged you? Why was it important for Paul to learn to depend on and work well with other believers?
- What do you think drove Paul to spend three years in the desert of Arabia? Why was this necessary to the development of his later ministry?

WEEK 3 READING GUIDE

DAY 1 – Acts 9:20-22, Acts 22:17-21

DAY 2 – Acts 26:12-18, Colossians 2:6-15

DAY 3 – 2 Corinthians 11:16-33

DAY 4 – 2 Corinthians 12:7-10, 2 Corinthians 4:1-6

DAY 5 – Acts 13-14 (Paul's first missionary journey with Barnabas)

LESSON 4

HIS LEGACY, OUR STORY

In lesson 4, we look to the twenty-year period at the end of Paul's life in which he did his greatest work and ministry. It was in this key season of his life he left an indelible legacy upon the world.

FROM ANTIOCH TO THE WORLD

In the first century, Antioch of Syria was the third largest city within the Roman empire (second only to Rome and Alexandria). It was a bustling, cosmopolitan city nestled under the impressive slopes of Mount Silpius. The port of Antioch was Seleucia, a smaller city situated on the Mediterranean coast 5-6 miles north of the mouth of the Orontes River.¹¹

In Acts, Luke records that after the death of Stephen a contingent of Christian believers fled to Antioch and preached Jesus to its blend of Jewish and Greek inhabitants. The hand of the Lord was with the church in Antioch and "a great number believed and turned unto the Lord" (Acts 11:21). When word of the fruitful work in Antioch made its way to Jerusalem, Barnabas, a good man full of the Holy Ghost and faith, was dispatched to oversee the work.¹²

As Jesus was preached in the city, the believers in the city became known by outsiders.

- **As we discover, "the disciples were called Christians first in Antioch" (Acts 11:26). It's likely that the term was used reproachfully at first to identify believers with the name they so often declared and demonstrated.**

The description of the Antiochan church in Acts 11 and 13 is rich in actions of faith and devotion. The characteristics we observe are:

- Preaching and teaching (11:20, 11:23, 11:26)
- Conversion of souls through evangelism (11:19-21)
- The use of Spiritual gifts (11:27-28)
- Giving (11:29-30)
- Prayer and fasting (13:1-3)

The distinctive belief in Jesus as Messiah or 'anointed' one meant they could rightly be labeled 'messianics,' or in Greek – christianoī.¹³ Though the term may have been thrown at the church as an insult initially, it became a label that stuck, and one which believers readily accepted with honor.

In time, the church grew in large numbers and Barnabas realized that more qualified leaders were needed to sustain the increase of Greek converts. In this rapid growth, a man of peculiar qualifications was needed. It is at this juncture that Barnabas travels to Tarsus in search of Paul.

- **That he "found" Paul suggests that Barnabas spent considerable time searching for him. Perhaps Paul was in hiding after his voice was banished from the synagogues of Tarsus.**

¹¹ Walker, Steps of Paul, 53.

¹² Other Antiochan leaders noted by Luke were Simeon, Lucius of Cyrene, and Manaen (Acts 13:1).

Whatever the case, Paul was located and invited into the work in Antioch.

"And when he had found him, he brought him unto Antioch. And it came to pass, that a whole year they assembled themselves with the church, and taught much people (Acts 11:26).

It was in Antioch where Paul found his place. For years, the city would serve as the point from which he would base his missionary travels. The significance of this city in the early history of the church cannot be overstated. As the first largely Gentile church, it exercised distinct influence at the time. It served as the headquarters for worldwide evangelism and the place to which Paul returned after three extensive missionary expeditions. It was also through the Antiochan elders that he received his first missionary commission, along with Barnabas.

"Now there were in the church that was at Antioch certain prophets and teachers; as Barnabas, and Simeon that was called Niger, and Lucius of Cyrene, and Manaen, which had been brought up with Herod the tetrarch, and Saul. As they ministered to the Lord, and fasted, the Holy Ghost said, Separate me Barnabas and Saul for the work whereunto I have called them. And when they had fasted and prayed, and laid their hands on them, they sent them away"
(Acts 13:1-3).

Soon after, Paul and Barnabas traveled from Antioch to the coast and then caught a ship heading to Cyprus. This expedition would go down in history as the first of three extensive journeys of Paul, all of which lit the flame of evangelism in the Gentile world.

HIS LEGACY

Though he had been converted on the road to Damascus at some point around AD 37, it was around ten years later when he ventured out on his first missionary journey with Barnabas.

- **For the most part, it took nearly a decade for his greatest ministry to begin. He was close to forty-five years old when his first missionary journey began.**

In AD 68, he would be beheaded by a Roman ax. In a little over twenty years, as a man in his fifties and sixties, he traveled over 10,000 miles throughout the Mediterranean world, planted over a dozen churches, and wrote thirteen theological masterpieces that are preserved in our New Testament.

James Stalker, the Scottish pastor and scholar wrote, "There are some men whose lives it is impossible to study without receiving the impression that they were expressly sent into the world to do a work required by the juncture of history on which they fell." We see this statement illustrated in the life of the Apostle Paul. His destiny was touched by divine providence at a time when the church was in its infancy and just beginning to make its mark on the world.

Since the dawn of the first century, Christ has chosen to do His work on the earth through flesh and blood. In moments when it seems as if all is lost for the church, the touch of the Master's hand descends upon a chosen individual and the tide turns. It is through vessels of flesh that Christ is glorified in the earth.

In the beginning, Paul drove the church to its ragged edge through intense persecution, abuse, and tyranny. Little did he know, however, that he served the benefit of providence and, by his efforts, initi-

¹³ Walker, Steps of Paul, 49. In Picirilli's study of Paul, he suggests that the word 'Christian' does not connote reproach, meaning nothing more than a follower of Christ, but it may have been used reproachfully at first.

ated a dispersion of Christians throughout the Greco-Roman world. In time, those who fled Jerusalem to escape his deadly ambition and wrath would join him, serve him, and follow him in ministry.

By the time of Paul's death, the church was a little over thirty years old. During this short time, Christianity had grown from a fringe movement in Jerusalem to an unstoppable force that had broken through geographical, racial, and political barriers. This rapid growth, though ultimately an act of God, was also an act of man. With this truth in mind, it is within the realm of reason to state that had it not been for Paul and his writings, Christianity would surely have tottered in its early days.

In *The Moody Atlas of Bible Lands*, Paul's impact is placed in the context of the sheer miles he traveled for the sake of the Gospel.

The distances traveled by the apostle Paul are nothing short of staggering. In point of fact, the New Testament registers the equivalent of about 13,400 airline miles that the great apostle journeyed; and if one takes into account the circuitous roads he necessarily had to employ at times, the total distance traveled would exceed that figure by a sizable margin.

Considering the means of transportation available in the Roman world, the average distance traveled in a day, the primitive paths, and rugged, sometimes mountainous terrain over which he had to venture, the sheer expenditure of the apostle's physical energy becomes unfathomable for us. Many of those miles carried Paul through unsafe and hostile environs largely controlled by bandits who eagerly awaited a prey. Accordingly, Paul's commitment to the Lord entailed a spiritual vitality that was inextricably joined to a superlative level of physical stamina and fearless courage. ¹⁴

These miles do not account for the travels of Paul which do not have documentation. There were, no doubt, hardships he endured which remain outside of the Biblical record. In his list of adversities in 2 Corinthians 11:16-33, he writes about certain events which must have occurred outside of Luke's narrative in Acts. Following in his footsteps, we walk across an area extending (at its greatest extent, say, from Jerusalem to Rome) of some 1,400 miles (2,250 km) with a host of places in between.

Throughout his ministry, it's obvious that Paul had a good understanding of geography because, in his letter to the Romans, he described his overall trajectory as having been conducted in an arc form "from Jerusalem all the way around to Illyricum" (modern Albania). He was a man who always seemed to have the bigger picture in mind. No matter where he was, he was always "on the way" to Rome and his ultimate destination in eternity.

OUR STORY

As of 2015, Christians represented 31.2% of the world's population. This percentage represents 2.3 billion people. It's extraordinary to think that these numbers began with one individual on a cross almost 2,000 years ago. Before Jesus died, He touched the lives of twelve disciples. After His resurrection and ascension, He decided to touch the life of another on the road to Damascus. From that day to this day, Christianity has touched 1,814 language groups and lives on every continent.

As the Apostle Paul partnered with Peter, Barnabas, and other first century apostles, and ventured out into a pre-Christian Gentile world, the foundation for global Christianity was laid. If you attribute the influence of Christianity to any good that has resulted in your life, then you owe Paul a certain amount of gratitude. Your story in Christ is a result of his legacy. Every time you read one of the epistles written by Paul, you reap the fruits of his labor.

¹⁴ Beitzel, Barry J. *The Moody Atlas of Bible Lands* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1985), 176-177.

His legacy, as great as it is, could not have been possible were it not for grace. By grace, God reaches into the crowd and pulls out potential. By grace, the lost are saved and the saved are called into the Kingdom. By grace, we can overcome the worst parts of our past and contribute to a calling so much bigger than ourselves. If you listen, you will hear grace calling you first to the cross, where Christ shed His blood to purchase your salvation. Then, if you listen further, you will hear grace calling you out of a broken past and into a future of promise.

"And I thank Christ Jesus our Lord who has enabled me, because He counted me faithful, putting me into the ministry, although I was formerly a blasphemer, a persecutor, and an [a]insolent man; but I obtained mercy because I did it ignorantly in unbelief. And the grace of our Lord was exceedingly abundant, with faith and love which are in Christ Jesus."

This is a faithful saying and worthy of all acceptance, that Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners, of whom I am chief. However, for this reason I obtained mercy, that in me first Jesus Christ might show all longsuffering, as a pattern to those who are going to believe on Him for everlasting life. Now to the King eternal, immortal, invisible, to God who alone is wise, be honor and glory forever and ever. Amen" (I Timothy 1:12-17).

THE TOUCH OF THE MASTER'S HAND

By Myra Brooks Welch

It was battered and scarred
and the auctioneer hardly thought it
worth his while to auction off the old violin –
but he held it up with a smile.

"What will we give for the old violin," he cried,
"who will start the bidding for me?
A dollar... A dollar... who will make it two?
Two dollars... who will make it three?
Three dollars once, three dollars twice –
Who's got four? Just one dollar more!
To bid on this old violin."

"Going, but gone, but no..."

From the back of the room,
a grey-haired man came forward
and he picked up the bow.

And wiping the dust off the old violin,
and tightening all the strings –
He played a melody pure and sweet –
as sweet as the angels sing.

Then the music ceased.

And the auctioneer,
in a voice that was quiet and low, said,
"Now, what will you give for this old violin?"
as he held it up with a bow.

"A thousand dollars? Who will make it two?
Two thousand, who will make it three?
Three thousand once, three thousand twice...
Now, that's a good price. Going and gone," said he.

And the people cheered!

But some of them asked the auctioneer,
"Well, we cannot understand, what changed its worth?"
Then came the reply,

"It was the touch of the Master's Hand."

You know, there's many a man, with his life out of tune,
and battered and scarred with sin, was auctioned cheap
to a thoughtless crowd much like the old violin.

A glass of wine, a mess of pottage, a game –
and he shuffles along.
He's going once, he's going twice –
he's going, he's almost gone.

But then the master comes
through that thoughtless crowd
and comes up aside his hand,
and touches him there and changes his life.

"What was it, my friend?"
It was the touch of the Master's Hand.
The worth of a soul and the change that is wrought,
just by one touch of the Master's Hand.

CONCLUSION: WRAP-UP ACTIVITY

Understanding the overall objective of Glimpses of Grace, it may be helpful to conclude the lesson with your own version of a "Cardboard Testimony." Designate a few people and ask them to write on a large piece of cardboard what their lives were like before Christ (addicted, lonely, suicidal, orphan, etc.). On the opposite side of the cardboard, ask them to write who they are now since they have been saved (in recovery, minister, an overcomer through Christ, cherished by the King, etc.). The goal of this activity is to provide real-world examples of God's saving grace and end the series with a time of reflection and worship.

STUDENT HANDOUT // LESSON 4

HIS LEGACY, YOUR STORY

KEY POINTS

- As we discover, “the disciples were called Christians first in Antioch” (Acts 11:26). It’s likely that the term was used reproachfully at first to identify believers with the name they so often declared and demonstrated.

In time, the church grew in large numbers and Barnabas realized that more qualified leaders were needed to sustain the increase of _____ converts. In this rapid growth, a man of peculiar qualifications was needed. It is at this juncture that Barnabas travels to Tarsus in search of _____.

- That he “found” Paul suggests that Barnabas spent considerable time searching for him. Perhaps Paul was in hiding after his voice was banished from the synagogues of Tarsus.

Though he had been converted on the road to Damascus at some point around AD 37, it was around _____ years later when he ventured out on his first missionary journey with Barnabas.

- For the most part, it took nearly a _____ for his greatest ministry to begin. He was close to _____ years old when his first missionary journey began.

WEEK 4 READING GUIDE

DAY 1 – Acts 15:36-41, Acts 16-18 (Paul’s second missionary journey)

DAY 2 – Acts 18-21 (Paul’s third missionary journey)

DAY 3 – Acts 22-23 (Paul arrested in Jerusalem and sent to Caesarea on the coast)

DAY 4 – Acts 24-26 (Paul’s testimony before Gentile rulers in Caesarea)

DAY 5 – Acts 27-28 (Paul sent by ship to Rome)