

THE FORETASTE OF PAUL'S GREAT SUFFERINGS: FAITHFUL DESPITE TERRIBLE TRIALS ACTS 09:23–30

Introduction

The one thing God wants is faithfulness. Believers are to be faithful no matter the trouble or trial. The one man who blazed across the pages of history who stands head and shoulders above all others in faithfulness is Paul.

- I. Faithful in witnessing, but faced a life-threatening plot (vv. 23-25).
- II. Faithful in seeking fellowship with believers, but rejected (vv. 26-28).
- III. Faithful in preaching boldly, but faced opposition and assassination (vv. 29-30).

I. Acts 09:23–25 Faithfulness in Witnessing

Paul was faithful in witnessing, faithful despite a life-threatening plot against him.

1. Paul had apparently been witnessing in Damascus for some time, preaching Christ and proving that Jesus was the Messiah, the Saviour promised by God (vv. 20, 22). He was strong in the Lord. His spiritual strength was evident and his proclamation confounded those who rebelled against the Lord and His gospel (v. 22).

The gospel is effective; it always is.

Heb 4:12 For the word of God is living and active. Sharper than any double-edged sword, it penetrates even to dividing soul and spirit, joints and marrow; it judges the thoughts and attitudes of the heart.

Isa 55:11 So is my word that goes out from my mouth: It will not return to me empty, but will accomplish what I desire and achieve the purpose for which I sent it.

John 4:35-36 “Do you not say, ‘Four months more and then the harvest’? I tell you, open your eyes and look at the fields! They are ripe for harvest. Even now the reaper draws his wages, even now he harvests the crop for eternal life, so that the sower and the reaper may be glad together.”

Gal 6:9 Let us not become weary in doing good, for at the proper time we will reap a harvest if we do not give up.

Psa 126:5-6 Those who sow in tears will reap with songs of joy. He who goes out weeping, carrying seed to sow, will return with songs of joy, carrying sheaves with him.

2. The Jews plotted to kill Paul. They became disturbed — full of anger, bitterness and enmity. Why? Why did they hate Paul with such vengeance?
 - a. They considered him a traitor to their religion and nation and cause (see Acts 9:1-2, 20-21. See Acts 4:2-4; and *Religionists*, Mt. 12:10.)
 - b. Paul was sharper than they were in debate. He out-argued them and they felt ashamed and embarrassed. They were unable to get the best of him mentally and spiritually, so they set out to retaliate physically.
 - c. The message of the gospel convicted and threatened them. The gospel demanded self-denial, the sacrifice of all they were and had to the Lord Jesus. (See *Cross and Discipleship*, Lk. 9:23.)

What the Jews did was convince the civil authorities, the governor of Damascus, that Paul was a fanatic, a rabble-rouser, a threat to the peace of the city. The Jews were so convincing, the governor sent patrols out on a manhunt for Paul and posted guards all around the city to prevent his escape (vv. 23-25: see 2 Cor. 11:33).

3. Paul escaped. The plot to kill him was discovered. Patrols and guards were everywhere. The way of escape was interesting. The city was surrounded by a wall; the disciples put him in a basket and lowered him down by the wall.

Thought 1. Paul's faithfulness and his bold witnessing are a dynamic example for all. No matter the opposition, we must be faithful in bearing testimony for Christ. People must hear the gospel, the glorious news that the Saviour has come to give life and to give it abundantly (Jn. 10:10).

John 10:10 *"The thief comes only to steal and kill and destroy; I have come that they may have life, and have it to the full."*

Mat 28:19-20 *"Therefore go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you. And surely I am with you always, to the very end of the age."*

Mark 16:15 *He said to them, "Go into all the world and preach the good news to all creation."*

Acts 1:8 *"But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes on you; and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth."*

Acts 5:20 *"Go, stand in the temple courts," he said, "and tell the people the full message of this new life."*

Thought 2. Being a fanatic is often the charge made against the believer and his witnessing for Christ. Note Paul's faithfulness and loyalty to Christ despite all.

Mat 10:22 “All men will hate you because of me, but he who stands firm to the end will be saved.”

2 Tim 1:8 So do not be ashamed to testify about our Lord, or ashamed of me his prisoner. But join with me in suffering for the gospel, by the power of God.

2 Tim 2:3-4 Endure hardship with us like a good soldier of Christ Jesus. No one serving as a soldier gets involved in civilian affairs – he wants to please his commanding officer.

James 1:12 Blessed is the man who perseveres under trial, because when he has stood the test, he will receive the crown of life that God has promised to those who love him.

1 Pet 2:19 For it is commendable if a man bears up under the pain of unjust suffering because he is conscious of God.

Thought 3. God will always make a way to escape if we are faithful in our witness. He will either deliver us from the difficulty or carry us through the difficulty. He will even carry us through death into His wonderful presence.

1 Cor 10:13 No temptation has seized you except what is common to man. And God is faithful; he will not let you be tempted beyond what you can bear. But when you are tempted, he will also provide a way out so that you can stand up under it.

2 Tim 4:18 The Lord will rescue me from every evil attack and will bring me safely to his heavenly kingdom. To him be glory for ever and ever. Amen.

ACTS 09:23 PAUL'S PREPARATION FOR JOURNEYS

After many days had gone by, the Jews conspired to kill him. Acts 09: 23

Note the words, “After *many* days had gone by.” This seems to refer to Paul's Arabian retirement where he spent two to three years alone with God.

In Galatians 1:15-18, Paul says that immediately after God saved and called him, he...

- did not consult with any man (to learn about Jesus),
- did not go up to Jerusalem (to confer with the apostles about Jesus),
- *but he went immediately into Arabia* where he stayed for about three years: (Gal. 1:17-18);
- then, after Arabia, he *returned* to Damascus.

What happened seems to be this: after Ananias helped Paul, he stayed with the disciples at Damascus for *several days* (hemeras tinās, a term indicating a short time)

(Acts 9:19). While there he preached like wildfire (v. 20); but in so doing, he began to sense a real inadequacy, a deep need to get alone with the Lord. This he did. He left Damascus, and just like Moses of old who sought the Lord for years in the desert, Paul went into the desert of Arabia to spend three years learning from the Lord Himself. It was in the quietness of the desert that he communed and learned of his Lord; it was there that God...

- revealed the truth to Paul causing Paul to rethink and restructure his beliefs.
- revealed the truths of Romans, Corinthians, Galatians, Ephesians, Philippians, Colossians and Thessalonians.
- revealed the marvels and mysteries of His glorious grace and His plan for believers and the world (see *Secret, Mystery*, 1 Cor. 2:7 for a list of the mysteries).

The point is this: “after many days” in Arabia, Paul *returned* to Damascus. It is here that the story picks up in Acts 9:23. Paul was a much more mature believer and servant of the Lord now. But note: this fact shows how time is needed for a believer to mature enough to carry out his lifetime ministry for the Lord.

=> After returning from Arabia and ministering in Damascus, it was still twelve years before Paul was called to launch his missionary journeys. He had to flee Damascus, for assassination attempts were made against his life. He went to Jerusalem, but he had to flee from there also. It was from Jerusalem that he went home to Tarsus and remained for eleven years. (See *Paul's Journeys*, Gal. 1:17-24.)

=> Paul's time in Tarsus, his hometown, was apparently both a learning and training time just as Arabia had been. But it was apparently a time of ministering as well.

Thought 1. Paul's time in Arabia and Tarsus show how a person must take time to get alone with God to learn, grow and prepare before carrying out his life ministry. □

ACTS 09: 23 PAUL'S JOURNEYS

A complete list of the significant journeys of Paul seems to be as follows (see *Paul's Journeys*, Gal. 1:17-24):

1. His conversion (Gal. 1:15-16; Acts 9:1f).
2. His first ministry in Damascus (Acts 9:19-22).
3. His time alone with God in Arabia (Gal. 1:17).
4. His second ministry in Damascus after returning from Arabia (Acts 9:23-25).
5. His first trip to Jerusalem for fifteen days to see Peter (Gal. 1:18-19; Acts 9:23-30). The apostles in Acts 9:27 would be Peter and James, the Lord's brother.

6. His ministry in and around Tarsus which apparently lasted for about eleven years (Gal. 1:21-2:1).
7. His call by Barnabas to help him minister in Antioch (Acts 11:25-26).
8. His second trip to Jerusalem to carry relief goods during a famine (Gal. 2:1f; Acts 11:30; 12:25).
9. His call and commissioning as a missionary (Acts 13:2-3).
10. His first great mission to the Gentiles: to Cyprus and Galatia (Acts 13:1-14:28).
11. His return to Antioch after completing his first missionary journey (Acts 14:26-28).
12. His third trip to Jerusalem to defend the gospel of grace before the Jerusalem Council (Acts 15:1-30).
13. His return to Antioch with the message from the Jerusalem council (Acts 15:30-35).
14. His second great mission to the Gentiles: to Europe (Acts 15:36-18:22).
15. His return to Antioch after completing his second missionary journey (Acts 18:22).
16. His third great mission to the Gentiles: Asia Minor and Europe (Acts 18:23-21:16).
17. His fourth and final trip to Jerusalem where he was arrested (Acts 21:17-26:32).
18. His journey to Rome as a prisoner (Acts 27:1-28:15).
19. His ministry in Rome while a prisoner (Acts 28:16-31). □

II. Acts 09:26–28 Paul's Faithfulness in Fellowship

Paul was faithful in seeking fellowship with believers, but they rejected him. Paul fled to Jerusalem. Note these facts.

1. Paul tried and tried to join the disciples at Jerusalem. The Greek word *tried* (epeirazen) means to try repeatedly.
2. Paul's past as the arch-persecutor of believers haunted him; the believers would not accept him. They did not believe his testimony. They were suspicious, thinking he was an impostor trying to work his way into the circle of believers...
 - to spy upon them
 - to identify all the disciples so he could arrest them
3. Paul was befriended by Barnabas. Somehow Barnabas began to sense Paul may be telling the truth. Apparently, he sat down with Paul and had Paul relate his experiences with Christ. Barnabas became thoroughly convinced that Paul was truthful, and took Paul to the apostles. (By apostles is meant Peter and James, the half-brother of Jesus who was to become, if he was not already, the pastor of the church at Jerusalem [Gal. 1:18-19]. The other apostles were probably out of town on some mission.) Note that Barnabas, after introducing Paul to Peter and James, shared three things about Paul:

=> Paul's conversion — that he had actually seen the Lord on the road to Damascus.

=> that the Lord had actually spoken to Paul.

=> that Paul had been preaching boldly in Damascus.

4. Paul was finally accepted. Peter was convinced and invited Paul to stay with him. Paul did, and he stayed fifteen glorious days, fellowshiping with the man whom the Lord Himself had chosen to be the first leader of His dear people (see Gal. 1:18. Note: Paul said his primary purpose for coming to Jerusalem was to see Peter.) This was important, for it meant he had not gone for the purpose of ministering, but to learn about Jesus from the leader of the apostolic band. Note also that while there, Paul was not sitting around revelling in the fellowship of Peter and James. He still ministered, still bore witness of the saving grace of God. He went out and preached Jesus.

Thought 1. Note the great struggle Paul went through just to be able to worship and fellowship with other believers. There was no thought whatsoever about forsaking the assembly of believers, no thoughts about worshipping alone out in nature or wherever. He fought to fellowship with other believers, fought until they accepted him.

Acts 2:42 They devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and to the fellowship, to the breaking of bread and to prayer.

Rom 1:11-12 I long to see you so that I may impart to you some spiritual gift to make you strong — that is, that you and I may be mutually encouraged by each other's faith.

Heb 10:25 Let us not give up meeting together, as some are in the habit of doing, but let us encourage one another — and all the more as you see the Day approaching.

III. Acts 09:29–30 Paul's Faithfulness in Preaching

Paul was faithful in preaching boldly, faithful despite facing opposition and an attempted assassination. Note three points.

1. Paul preached boldly in Jerusalem. It must be remembered that Paul *had not* gone to Jerusalem to preach, but to see Peter (Gal. 1:18). In fact, it was dangerous for him to become too visible because it had been only three years since he had been commissioned by the city officials to be the arch-persecutor of the church. So, why was Paul found preaching? There are probably two reasons.
 - a. He could not keep quiet. Sharing the Lord and the message of the glorious gospel of salvation was in his heart, and he just had to share with all who would listen.
 - b. He still felt pain over Stephen's death and ached for the Grecian Jews (Hellenists) he had aroused to murder Stephen. Being in Jerusalem gave him the opportunity to go back to them, confess his wrong, and proclaim Christ to them. He probably went into

the very synagogue where he had argued against Stephen, trying to reach the very ones who had helped him stone Stephen.

Thought 1. There is a great lesson here. We should try to reach those we have offended or led astray.

Mat 5:23-24 *“Therefore, if you are offering your gift at the altar and there remember that your brother has something against you, leave your gift there in front of the altar. First go and be reconciled to your brother; then come and offer your gift.”*

Rom 12:18 *If it is possible, as far as it depends on you, live at peace with everyone.*

2. The opposition was fierce. The Grecians refused to surrender to the One called “Jesus.” They rebelled, arguing with Paul. They became so infuriated with him that they determined to assassinate him.
3. The believers discovered the plot. But the Lord Himself also warned Paul, instructing him to flee the city and go to Tarsus, his hometown. It was there that Paul was to begin reaching the Gentiles of the world (Acts 22:17-21).

Thought 1. The major thrust to note is Paul's unswerving faithfulness to Christ despite terrible trial. A courageous example for all!

Thought 2. Note the four commendable traits seen in Paul throughout these events:

- => a strong conviction in Christ as the true Messiah.
- => an iron determination to be obedient in witnessing — regardless.
- => an unswerving perseverance in purpose.
- => a strong, strong stamina and commitment to preaching.

Acts 1:8 *“But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes on you; and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth.”*

Acts 22:14-15 *“Then he said: ‘The God of our fathers has chosen you to know his will and to see the Righteous One and to hear words from his mouth. You will be his witness to all men of what you have seen and heard.’”*

Acts 4:20 *“For we cannot help speaking about what we have seen and heard.”*

2 Cor 4:13 *It is written: “I believed; therefore I have spoken.” With that same spirit of faith we also believe and therefore speak.*

Titus 2:15 *These, then, are the things you should teach. Encourage and rebuke with all authority. Do not let anyone despise you. ■*

THE STATE OF THE CHURCH: WHAT A CHURCH SHOULD BE

ACTS 09:31

Introduction

This single verse is a summary statement showing the state of the church. It is a picture of just what a church should be.

- I. Condition 1: at peace (v. 31).
- II. Condition 2: edified — strengthened (v. 31).
- III. Condition 3: living — walking (v. 31).
 - a. In fearful trust.
 - b. In the Spirit's comfort.
- IV. Condition 4: growing (v. 31).

I. *Acts 09:31 A Church at Peace*

The church was at peace. The word *peace* (*eirenen*) in the Greek tense is active: the church was in a continuous state of peace or rest. It had been going through a most troublesome time, but now the trouble had been handled and peace reigned. Calm and rest settled in and took control. The idea is that the believers were now rejoicing in the peace and deliverance God had given from their great trial. The problem had been severe persecution (see notes, Acts 8:1-4; 9:1-2). But now the storm had settled: peace and calm, quiet and rest prevailed.

God Himself stopped the persecution. He did so by doing two things.

1. God converted the arch-persecutor himself, Saul of Tarsus (see notes, Acts 9:1-9. Rather humorously and rejoicing in the grace of God, that is one way to stop the persecution: convert the persecutor!)
2. God overruled the evil of men, worked it out for good. He used a world event to distract the Jewish rulers from the church. The Roman emperor Caligula was attempting to set up a statue or an image of himself in the temple at Jerusalem. He was set on forcing the Jews to worship his image. This, of course, was anathema, accursed to the Jews. In their minds, it was a much greater threat than the small movement of Christianity. Therefore, they turned from persecuting the church to dealing with the threat of the Roman emperor.

Thought 1. The church is to joy and rejoice when peace and rest reign about the church.

- 1) The church should joy in God who worked things out for good and brought such a state of peace to the church. The believer shall suffer persecution (see Ph. 1:28; 2 Tim. 3:12). There is no escape. Therefore, when peace reigns there is cause for rejoicing.
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James 1:2-4 Consider it pure joy, my brothers, whenever you face trials of many kinds, because you know that the testing of your faith develops perseverance. Perseverance must finish its work so that you may be mature and complete, not lacking anything.

1 Pet 4:12-13 Dear friends, do not be surprised at the painful trial you are suffering, as though something strange were happening to you. But rejoice that you participate in the sufferings of Christ, so that you may be overjoyed when his glory is revealed.

2) The church should make use of the calm and peace, bearing a stronger testimony than ever before. Times of peace and quiet, rest and comfort are too often used for revelling in the *blessings* of fellowship, and the church becomes complacent and lethargic. This should not be the case. Calm and peace mean the gospel is *now unhindered and unopposed*. Therefore, opportunity for proclaiming the gospel *freely* should be grasped to the fullest.

Luke 19:10 “For the Son of Man came to seek and to save what was lost.”

John 9:4 “As long as it is day, we must do the work of him who sent me. Night is coming, when no one can work.”

John 20:21 Again Jesus said, “Peace be with you! As the Father has sent me, I am sending you.” (see Lk. 19:10)

Col 4:5 Be wise in the way you act toward outsiders; make the most of every opportunity.

Psa 90:12 Teach us to number our days aright, that we may gain a heart of wisdom.

II. Acts 09:31 A Strengthened Church

The church was *edified* or *strengthened* (oikudomoumene). The word means to build up, to grow spiritually, to promote spiritual growth, to establish, to confirm in the faith. The tense is continuous action. The believers were continuing to grow spiritually...

- becoming stronger in their faith in the Lord Jesus.
- learning more of the Word of God, of Jesus’ teachings and doctrines.
- gaining a greater knowledge of the Holy Spirit’s presence and power.
- learning how and becoming more effective witnesses for the Lord.
- gaining more and more boldness both for living and witnessing.

Rom 14:19 Let us therefore make every effort to do what leads to peace and to mutual edification.

Rom 15:2 Each of us should please his neighbour for his good, to build him up.

1 Cor 14:3 But everyone who prophesies speaks to men for their strengthening, encouragement and comfort.

Eph 4:12 To prepare God’s people for works of service, so that the body of Christ may be built up.

Eph 4:29 *Do not let any unwholesome talk come out of your mouths, but only what is helpful for building others up according to their needs, that it may benefit those who listen.*

III. **Acts 09:31** *A Church Living in the Fear of the Lord*

The church was living or walking in the Lord just as the Holy Spirit exhorts in Scripture.

Col 2:6 *So then, just as you received Christ Jesus as Lord, continue to live in him.*

1 John 2:6 *Whoever claims to live in him must walk as Jesus did.*

1 Pet 2:21 *To this you were called, because Christ suffered for you, leaving you an example, that you should follow in his steps.*

Note they were *living* in two things in particular.

1. They lived in the “fear of the Lord” (see *Fear*, Acts 9:31). Very simply, this means to live in “the fear of the Lord”; to live before Him in trust, reverence, awe, worship and obedience. It means to live a life that witnesses to the glory of His love and grace, holiness and righteousness.

Mat 10:28 *“Do not be afraid of those who kill the body but cannot kill the soul. Rather, be afraid of the One who can destroy both soul and body in hell.”*

Luke 1:50 *“His mercy extends to those who fear him, from generation to generation.”*

Acts 10:35 *But accepts men from every nation who fear him and do what is right.*

1 Pet 1:17 *Since you call on a Father who judges each man’s work impartially, live your lives as strangers here in reverent fear.*

Deu 10:12 *And now, O Israel, what does the Lord your God ask of you but to fear the Lord your God, to walk in all his ways, to love him, to serve the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul.*

Josh 24:14 *“Now fear the Lord and serve him with all faithfulness. Throw away the gods your forefathers worshipped beyond the River and in Egypt, and serve the Lord.”*

Psa 25:12 *Who, then, is the man that fears the Lord? He will instruct him in the way chosen for him.*

Psa 31:19 *How great is your goodness, which you have stored up for those who fear you, which you bestow in the sight of men on those who take refuge in you.*

Psa 147:11 *The Lord delights in those who fear him, who put their hope in his unfailing love.*

Prov 1:7 *The fear of the Lord is the beginning of knowledge, but fools despise wisdom and discipline.*

Eccl 12:13 *Now all has been heard; here is the conclusion of the matter: Fear God and keep his commandments, for this is the whole duty of man.*

Isa 8:13 *The Lord Almighty is the one you are to regard as holy, he is the one you are to fear, he is the one you are to dread.*

2. They lived and walked in the comfort of the Holy Spirit. The word *encouraged* (parakleseis) means *paraclete*, the very title by which Christ called the Holy Spirit. It means comforter, advisor, helper, exhorter. The picture is that of One who is called to stand by the believer's side (just as Jesus did). That is the reason Jesus made the great promise: "[God] will give you *another Counsellor* [Comforter]." (See note, Jn. 14:26.) The Holy Spirit was flooding their hearts with a great sense...
- of the Lord's presence: comforting, advising, helping, counselling, encouraging and exhorting them.
 - of joy and rejoicing over the great salvation that had saved them to the utmost and given them an eternal inheritance in the presence of God Himself.

John 14:16 *"And I will ask the Father, and he will give you another Counsellor to be with you forever."*

John 14:26 *"But the Counsellor, the Holy Spirit, whom the Father will send in my name, will teach you all things and will remind you of everything I have said to you."*

Col 1:12 *Giving thanks to the Father, who has qualified you to share in the inheritance of the saints in the kingdom of light.*

1 Pet 1:4 *And into an inheritance that can never perish, spoil or fade — kept in heaven for you.*

ACTS 09:31 FEAR (PHOBO)

Then the church throughout Judea, Galilee and Samaria enjoyed a time of peace. It was strengthened; and encouraged by the Holy Spirit, it grew in numbers, living in the fear of the Lord. Acts 09:31

Fear means to stand in awe and reverence before God. It does not mean to fear God's presence, to shrink and withdraw from Him. To the contrary, it means that a person reverences and stands in awe of Him, wanting to approach and know Him because He is the majestic and sovereign Being of the universe. It means that a person does not fear...

- to trust and believe Him
- to approach and worship Him
- to do His will
- to serve Him ☐

IV. *Acts 09:31 A Growing Church*

The church was growing and multiplying by leaps and bounds. But note why the church was growing at such a rapid pace. The believers...

- were at rest and peace
- were edifying, strengthening and building each other up
- were living and walking in the fear of the Lord
- were living and walking under the control of the Spirit

These are the essentials for church growth, for reaching people with the gospel of the Lord Jesus. ■