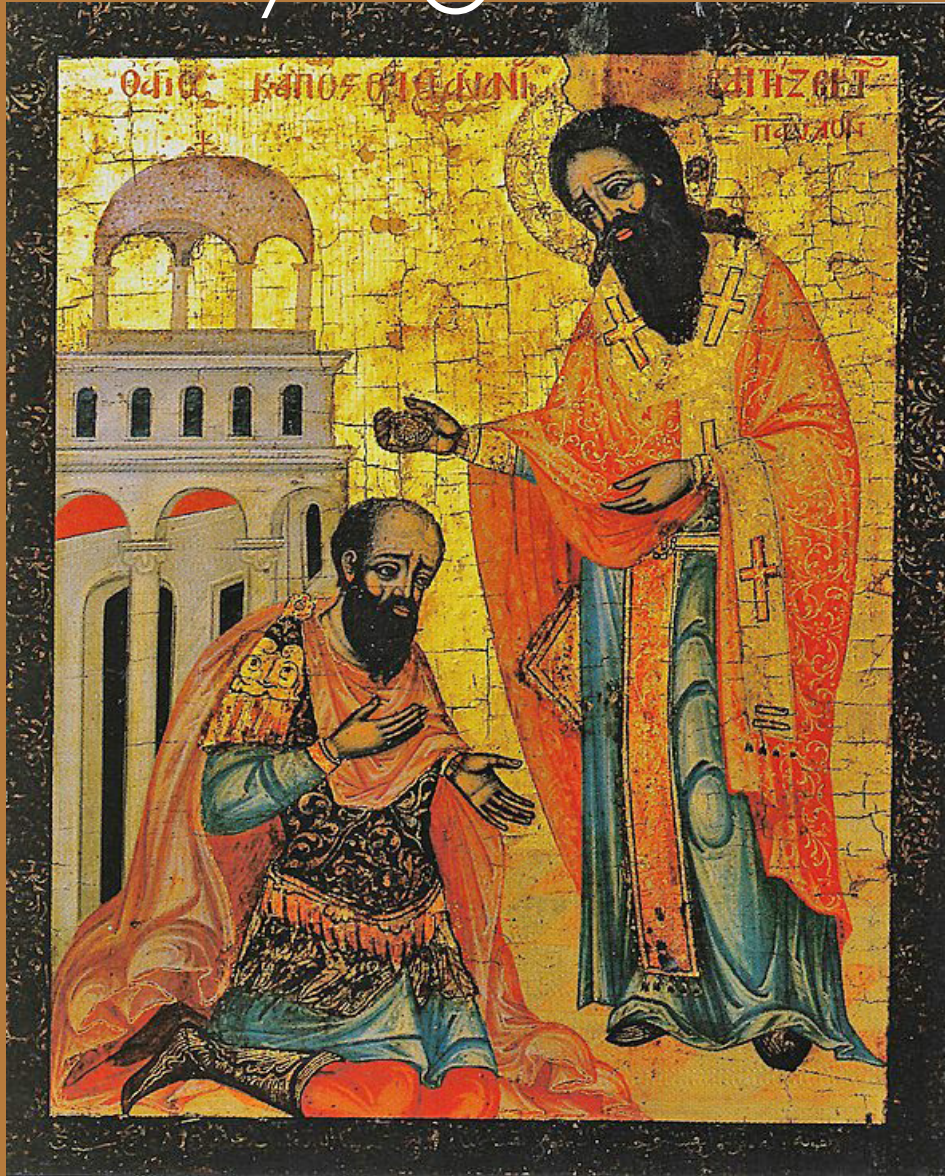


Journeying with Paul



A Five Part Bible Study
by
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Introduction

Many have written about the apostle Paul and his teaching. This group of studies focus on Paul's journey, from childhood to conversion, his calling and subsequent missionary activities. We'll look at the highs and lows along this journey of faith, the people he met who became friends, followers or enemies, and some of the issues he addressed.

Along the way, there's a name change from Saul to Paul, but as we'll be looking at a variety of Scripture passages and not all in date order, we will refer to him as Paul from the start.

As to the number of missionary journeys undertaken by Paul, commentators vary from 3 to many. For this reason, we shall take a relaxed viewpoint, considering that Paul's journey began, as it does for us all, in his childhood. Paul's race, background, education, and position in society all contributed to his growth and development before that amazing conversion experience on the road to Damascus.

In his conversations and letters Paul emphasised the importance of faith in Jesus, salvation through grace, the Holy Spirit's presence in believer's lives, and the firm hope of Jesus' return.

'But because of his great love for us, God, who is rich in mercy, made us alive with Christ even when we were dead in transgressions—it is by grace you have been saved.' (Ephesians 2:4,5)

'The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ and the love of God and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with you all.' (2 Corinthians 13:14)

'For in one Spirit we were all baptized into one body—Jews or Greeks, slaves or free—and all were made to drink of one Spirit.' (1 Corinthians 12:13)

'I consider that our present sufferings are not worth comparing with the glory that will be revealed in us.' (Romans 8:19-21)

'For since death came through a man, the resurrection of the dead comes also through a man. For as in Adam all die, so in Christ all will be made alive.' (1 Corinthians 15:21,22)

Cover image: 18th century icon, The Baptism of Paul, artist unknown

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Study 1: The Journey Begins (c. AD 35-45)

Key verses

'I am a Jew, born in Tarsus of Cilicia, but brought up in this city. I studied under Gamaliel and was thoroughly trained in the law of our ancestors. I was just as zealous for God as any of you are today. I persecuted the followers of this Way to their death, arresting both men and women and throwing them into prison, as the high priest and all the Council can themselves testify. I even obtained letters from them to their associates in Damascus, and went there to bring these people as prisoners to Jerusalem to be punished.'
(Acts 22:1-5a)



Aelbert Cuyp, Conversion of Saul, 1645

a) The background to Paul's journey

(Read Philippians 3:4b-6, Acts 18:1-3, Acts 22:1-5a, 25-28)

Paul (or Saul as he was previously known) was a Greek-speaking Jew born in Tarsus, now a city in south-central Turkey but an important stopping place for traders during the time of the Roman Empire. Paul was also a Roman citizen, a highly prized right and possibly a reward for one of his ancestor's loyal services to a Roman administrator. It would, in time, prove to be a very useful privilege.

Paul was possibly not a man of wealth, as he worked as a tentmaker to finance his mission, which helped make valuable contacts on his journeys. Growing up, he was a member of the Pharisees, a devout religious mix of both scribes and laypeople that was flourishing at that time.

The Pharisees were devout students of the Hebrew Bible, upholders of the Jewish Law, believers in life after death and accepting some non-biblical traditions as an important part of

their faith. Paul mentions this in Galatians 1:14, 'I was advancing in Judaism beyond many of my own age among my people and was extremely zealous for the traditions of my fathers.'

Paul's teacher in his early years was the well-respected Gamaliel, who later helped when the Apostles were facing danger (Acts 5:34-39). Paul was also familiar with Greek and Stoic philosophers.

For much of the first half of his adult life, Paul readily admitted to persecuting the fledgling Christian movement. At the time, it was the high priest and the Sadducees who were the chief persecutors, rather than the Pharisees, but Paul had reasoned that this new movement was potentially disruptive and dangerous, and needed stamping out before it got out of control.

Q) Paul had all the qualifications for being at the forefront of an anti-Christian movement. Did your own background aid, or make more difficult, your personal journey of faith?

Q) Would Paul's background have suggested he could, one day, become a Christian missionary?

Q) How easy do you find it to engage with the Bible, and particularly the more ancient writings in the Old Testament that Paul was so familiar with?

b) The turning point

(Read Acts 22:5b-21, Galatians 1:11-12, 1 Timothy 1:15-16)

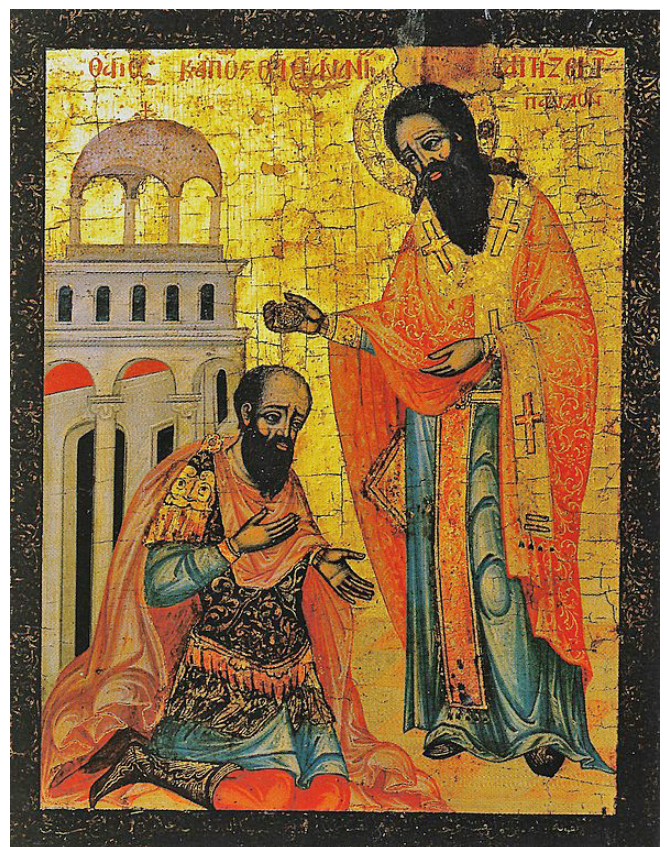
Paul presents a potted history of his conversion following his arrest in Jerusalem, reminding those who were encouraging Roman soldiers to lock him up that they were talking about someone who had been more jealous in upholding the Jewish faith, before his conversion, than many who were now opposing him.

The story of Paul's encounter with Jesus on the road to Damascus is a precis of that in Acts 9. He is insistent that this change in his life was not of his own doing or imposed on him by others (emphasised in his letter to the Galatians). It was a heavenly confrontation with the risen Jesus of Nazareth that transformed and gave Paul a new understanding of everything Jewish in his life.

Paul, being a good Jew, follows God's instruction to go to Damascus where his sight is restored, and Ananias, also a devout Jew, is chosen for this role. He delivered God's message and encouraged Paul to be baptized and have his sins washed away.

From Paul's letter to Timothy, we know he was aware of the sins of his past life as a persecutor of Christians. No doubt the memory of Stephen being stoned to death (Acts 7:54-60) was still fresh in his memory.

Paul returns to Jerusalem and, whilst at prayer in the temple, discovers the focus of his calling, to be a witness not to the Jews, who would oppose him, but to the Gentiles.



C18 Icon, Baptism of Paul the Apostle

Q) Paul's conversion experience was spectacular, far more so than most of us will have experienced. Did it have to be so for a man like Paul? How does it compare with your own turning point?

Q) Paul had expected that his calling would be to witness to the Jews, the people he knew best, but God had a different plan. Looking back on your own life, was the path God led you toward one that you expected?

Q) Paul says, 'I was shown mercy so that in me, the worst of sinners, Christ Jesus might display his immense patience as an example for those who would believe in him and receive eternal life' (1 Tim 1:16). How does this speak into your own experience?

c) Paul's early travels

(Read Acts 9:19-30, Galatians 1:13-24, Acts 11:25-26)

Some things are important and need restating. In writing Acts, Luke includes three passages that specifically relate to Paul's conversion and defend his calling to preach to the Gentiles (in chapters 9, 22, and 26), which the Jews fail to understand. The emphasis again is very much that this call was directly from Jesus Christ and no other source, so Paul had no choice but to obey.

There are discrepancies between Luke's words and Paul's own explanation of the early days of his calling in a letter he sent to the Galatian church, where he mentions travelling to Arabia before spending time in Jerusalem, and then moving on to Caesarea, Syria, and Cilicia. One explanation might simply be that Luke joined the team later and was therefore not so familiar with some of Paul's earlier movements.

But the emphasis is also different. To Paul, it was vital that the Galatians understood his mission was a direct result of the vision of Jesus, and the calling that followed. He was at no point relying on human wisdom or advice. By way of contrast, Luke wanted to emphasise both the heaven-ordained nature of Paul's conversion and the genuine Christian message he proclaimed in the Damascus synagogues,

calling Jesus 'Son of God' – which led to anger and persecution from the Jews, who were unable to reconcile this 'Saul' with the one they had previously known.

The second reading from Acts has an enthusiastic Barnabas reaching out to Paul in Tarsus, looking for help in his own mission work in Antioch. Many believers had fled there and into Phoenicia and Cyprus, due to persecution following the stoning to death of Stephen. The church in Jerusalem had sent Barnabas to encourage them and preach to the Greeks also, 'telling them the good news about the Lord Jesus' (Acts 11:20).

Paul and Barnabas worked together with the local church for a year, and it was in Antioch that the believers were first referred to as Christians (Acts 11:26).

Q) How important is it for us, as we read our Bibles, to understand the context in which the words were written, and what was included or left out of the message?

Q) Does Paul spending time in Arabia for a while before really engaging with the apostles in Jerusalem seem like a wise move, and if so, why might that be?

Q) Barnabas was quick to see the potential in Paul, despite his past record as a persecutor. But put yourself in the place of the apostles hearing what had happened on the road to Damascus, and how comfortable would you be in embracing this 'new convert'?

Paul on a theme of 'calling'

'He has saved us and called us to a holy life—not because of anything we have done but because of his own purpose and grace. This grace was given us in Christ Jesus before the beginning of time.' (2 Timothy 1:10)

'Therefore, since we are surrounded by such a great cloud of witnesses, let us throw off everything that hinders and the sin that so easily entangles. And let us run with perseverance the race marked out for us, 2 fixing our eyes on Jesus, the pioneer and perfecter of faith. For the joy set before him he endured the cross, scorning its shame, and sat down at the right hand of the throne of God.' (Hebrews 12:1-2)

'As a prisoner for the Lord, then, I urge you to live a life worthy of the calling you have received. Be completely humble and gentle; be patient, bearing with one another in love. Make every effort to keep the unity of the Spirit through the bond of peace. There is one body and one Spirit, just as you were called to one hope when you were called; one Lord, one faith, one baptism; one God and Father of all, who is over all and through all and in all.' (Ephesians 4:1-6)

'With this in mind, we constantly pray for you, that our God may make you worthy of his calling, and that by his power he may bring to fruition your every desire for goodness and your every deed prompted by faith. We pray this so that the name of our Lord Jesus may be glorified in you, and you in him, according to the grace of our God and the Lord Jesus Christ.' (2 Thessalonians 1:11-12)

A thought for prayer

Pray for all those who feel called to the mission of sharing the Good News, whether through the local church or within the community, finding new ways of 'being church'.

Study 2: A call to mission (c. AD 46-48)

Key verses

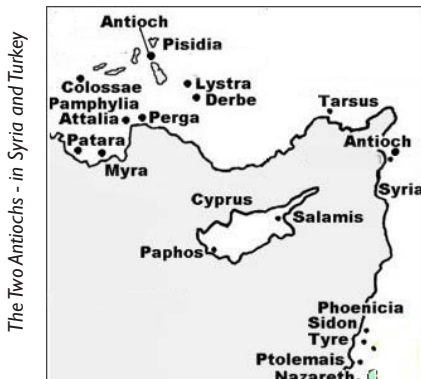
'While they were worshipping the Lord and fasting, the Holy Spirit said, "Set apart for me Barnabas and Saul for the work to which I have called them." So after they had fasted and prayed, they placed their hands on them and sent them off.'
(Acts 13:2-3)



Jacob Pynas, Paul and Barnabas at Lystra, 1605-1650

a) Called to mission

(Read Acts 13:1-12; Acts 13:13-32; Acts 13:49-52)



Luke describes the Holy Spirit calling Paul and Barnabas into mission whilst at Syrian Antioch. After fasting, prayer, and the laying on of hands, they travel by sea to Cyprus and begin their ministry. They are aided by John Mark who, tradition tells us, was a cousin of Barnabas and the author of the second gospel. Their journey through Cyprus brings them to Paphos, where a false prophet is exposed and the local proconsul becomes a believer. It is here we first hear of Saul (named after Israel's first king) becoming known as Paul.

From Paphos they sail to Perga, in Pamphylia (southern Turkey), where John Mark leaves them and returns to Jerusalem. We are not told why, but later there will be a falling out between Paul and Barnabas over John Mark. From Perga, they travel to Pisidian Antioch (in today's Turkey), where Paul establishes what will become the pattern of his ministry - finding the local synagogue and, if refused an audience there, speaking directly to Gentiles. Paul was in no two minds about God's acceptance of both Jew and Gentile believers.

In the synagogue, the leaders begin by reading from the Law and the Prophets, and then invite Paul, as a visiting Pharisee, to speak. Paul gives them a precis of all that God has done for them through history, including the present reality of Jesus' death and resurrection; 'We tell you the good news: What God promised our ancestors he has fulfilled for us, their children, by raising up Jesus' (13:32).

Paul's words have a profound effect on many and he and Barnabas are invited back, when 'almost the whole city gathered to hear the word of the Lord' (13:44).

However, some Jews who were jealous of the effect of Paul's words stir up local opposition, and so, following Jesus' advice to his disciples (Mark 6:11) to 'shake the dust from their feet' and move on, they do just that, avoiding conflict, but leaving behind many strong believers, we are told, filled with the Holy Spirit.

Q) What do vs 1-3 tell you about the church in Antioch, and how does it relate to your own experience of church life?

Q) Paul is preaching to Jews and Gentile converts in Pisidian Antioch. How does the way he frames his message of salvation (from v 16) make it easier to be understood, and is there anything we can learn from his presentation style?

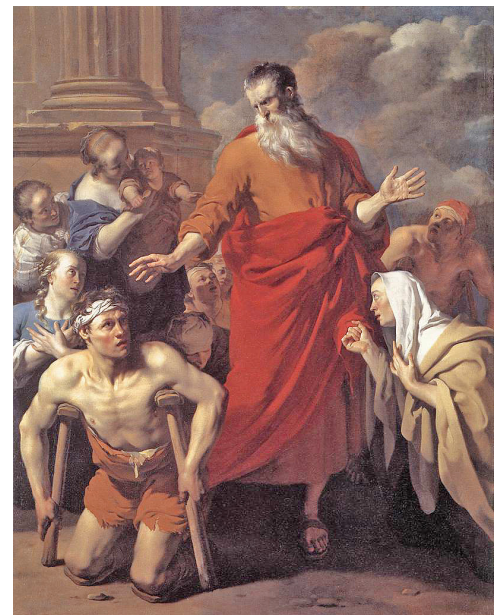
Q) Why do you think the Jewish leaders might be so against what Paul, one of their own, was preaching?

b) A learning process

(Read Acts 14:1-7; Acts 14:8-18; Acts 14:19-28)

Leaving Pisidian Antioch, the main Roman road offered Paul and Barnabas two choices, to travel north through the mountains to Comana, or southeast to the Greek city to Iconium and onward to the Roman colony of Lystra. Their choice of the latter would bring their ministry to three culturally distinct cities in Galatia.

Iconium, surrounded by fertile fields and forests, was broadly Greek in culture, resisting Roman influence. Paul and Barnabas begin again in the local synagogue, sharing their Christ-centred message with great success, with many Greeks and Jews becoming believers. So they stay a while, despite growing opposition from both Jews and Gentiles, until eventually their safety was at risk and it made sense to move on.



DUIJARDIN Karel, St Paul Healing the Cripple at Lystra, 1663

There may not have been a synagogue in Lystra, so Paul preaches outside to a crowd, and brings healing to a man, discerning in him a spark of faith. The crowd mistakenly assume the miracle is through the power of their gods, Zeus and Hermes, to the horror of Paul and Barnabas, who realise it is to themselves that sacrifices are about to be offered! In their defence, it's unlikely the Lystrans understood Jewish culture, hence Paul's response, not quoting scripture but pointing out the good things that they already enjoy in their daily lives through God's abundant blessings.

At this point, Jews from Antioch and Iconium arrive and stir up trouble, insisting that if Paul and Barnabas are not gods then they are imposters only worthy of stoning. Paul is injured by the crowd, and only the intervention of local believers saves him. So, the next day they are off again, sharing the good news in the border town of Derbe before returning to Lystra, Iconium and Antioch, encouraging believers and appointing elders for the locally established churches.

Then more travelling by land and sea, until they return to Syrian Antioch and report to their sending church all that God had done through them, and how 'a door of faith to the Gentiles' had been opened. Later we hear of Timothy from Lystra, and Gaius from Derbe, candidates for mission following the good work of Paul and Barnabas.

Q) Paul & Barnabas had a choice as they left Iconium, and possibly not much time to consider options, bearing in mind the threats to their safety. How difficult are some of the choices we make in our journeys of faith, and is it possible to sense God's direction at these times?

Q) Life does not always go the way we plan it, as demonstrated in the Lystran crowd's response to the healing of a crippled man. Put yourself in the shoes of Paul and Barnabas, and how does it feel? Can you imagine what your response would have been?

Q) Paul and Barnabas eventually return to their sending church and report back on their mission work. How would you sum up their efforts, and all they had experienced? How would a more 'risk-averse' church of today handle such a report?

c) Decisions to be made (ground rules)

(Read Acts 15:1-11; Acts 15:12-21; Acts 15:22-35)

Paul's calling to the Gentiles was well established, but there was some contention regarding the traditional Jewish custom of circumcision. The convening of the council of apostles and Christian leaders at Jerusalem around A.D. 49 was an event of real importance. Before Paul's ministry began, all Gentiles who had acknowledged Jesus as Messiah (except for Cornelius) had done so through the Jewish system, as proselytes or 'God-fearers'. Now, with Paul preaching directly to Gentiles, all had seemingly changed, and clarification was needed. Was circumcision really a prerequisite for the salvation of Gentile believers?

In Jerusalem the apostles and elders spend time in discussion before Paul states his case; that not long ago they had been happy that it was God's will he should take the gospel message to the Gentiles, later confirmed in the gifting of the Holy Spirit to these new believers. So, in God's eyes they were no different to the Jews; 'We believe it is through the grace of our Lord Jesus that we are saved, just as they are' (v11)

At which point James, thought to be the brother of Jesus and a member of the Jerusalem Council, stands up, and without

mentioning Paul and Barnabas by name reminds council members about Simon Peter's testimony regarding Cornelius, how his eyes had been opened to the truth that God was choosing believing Gentiles as a 'people' for himself, just like the Jews. For this reason alone, they should not place stumbling blocks in the way of these people but welcome them.

A letter will be written to these Gentile believers, and in the interests of Jewish-Gentile unity and fellowship, all will be encouraged to follow a lifestyle that included abstinence from certain practices.

This is agreed and the letter is taken by Paul and Barnabas, accompanied by Judas and Silas, two prophetic voices from Jerusalem in need of mission training. The letter is received with enthusiasm in Antioch, where Paul and Barnabas remain for a while, as they and many others, teach and preach the word of the Lord.

After a period of time Silas and Judas, having gained valuable experience, return home with the full blessing of Paul and the believers.

Q) Would you call the proposal the James brings to the table from v13 a clever compromise, or were the rules he proposed still an unnecessary burden for Gentile believers?

Q) Changes in society, particularly over sexuality, have been responsible for a lot of discussion, and sometimes painful decisions within faith communities. How have such changes been received within your own church fellowship?

Q) Over many centuries, the worldwide church has evolved into many denominations, sometimes over minor disagreements but also over more fundamental differences in doctrine. How well does the bigger church family in your area get along, and could more be done to promote unity?

Paul on a theme of 'God loves all people'

'In reading this, then, you will be able to understand my insight into the mystery of Christ, which was not made known to people in other generations as it has now been revealed by the Spirit to God's holy apostles and prophets. This mystery is that through the gospel the Gentiles are heirs together with Israel, members together of one body, and sharers together in the promise in Christ Jesus.' (Ephesians 3:4-6)

'I have written you quite boldly on some points to remind you of them again, because of the grace God gave me to be a minister of Christ Jesus to the Gentiles. He gave me the priestly duty of proclaiming the gospel of God, so that the Gentiles might become an offering acceptable to God, sanctified by the Holy Spirit.' (Ephesians 15:15-16)

'Consequently, you are no longer foreigners and strangers, but fellow citizens with God's people and also members of his household, built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, with Christ Jesus himself as the chief cornerstone.' (Ephesians 2:19-20)

A thought for prayer

Pray for all those who have yet to fully appreciate how much God loves all people, that they might hear, understand and respond to the Good News of the Gospel.

Study 3: Paul and Silas (c AD 50-52)

Key verses

'At that hour of the night the jailer took them and washed their wounds; then immediately he and all his household were baptized. The jailer brought them into his house and set a meal before them; he was filled with joy because he had come to believe in God—he and his whole household.'
(Acts 16:33-34)



Marie Elenrieder, The Baptism of Lydia and Family, 1861

a) A change of partner

(Read Acts 15:36-44, Acts 16:1-5,6-10)

Paul thought it would be good to revisit places where he and Barnabas had been on their recent mission journey but didn't want Barnabas's cousin John Mark with them. It may be that Mark's natural sympathies lay more with Jewish than Gentile Christians, and Paul still bore scars suffered at the hands of the Jewish opposition.

But encouragingly, this apparent falling out between the leadership doubles the mission force, as Barnabas and Mark return to Cyprus, and Paul invites Silas to join his team. Paul knew him as a trusted leader and prophet in Jerusalem (Acts 15:22) and as a Roman citizen, which brought useful privileges.

So, with the blessing of the fellowship in Antioch, Paul and Silas set out to encourage the churches in Syria and Cilicia (now part of southern Turkey) before travelling to the Galatian border town of Derbe and onward to Lystra. Here Paul discovers a disciple called Timothy. Writing later, Paul praises the faith of Timothy's grandmother Lois and his mother Eunice (2 Timothy 1:5).

With a Jewish mother and Greek father, Timothy would traditionally have been circumcised as a child and raised in the religion of its mother, but this hadn't happened in Timothy's case.

So why, after all the discussion in Jerusalem, should Paul now decide Timothy needed circumcising? Quite possibly because in the eyes of the Jewish community where he lived, Timothy was considered to be a Jew, and Paul thought it best that he should be considered a 'good' Jew.

Back on the mission field, they share the contents of the Jerusalem Council letter, and the number of believers continues to grow.

Paul's spiritual focus is shown in the direction they travel next, as God's Spirit diverts them away from both Asia and Bithynia, although why we are not told. They arrive in Troas where Paul has a vision of a man begging them to go to Macedonia (in today's Greece), which the team arrange to do at once.

Q) Encouragement was very much a part of Paul's approach to mission, revisiting the believers on his travels and making sure all was well. Do we see enough of this today, and how might it be seen?

Q) Put yourself in Paul's shoes, and having decided that God did not require Gentile believers to be circumcised, how might you have addressed the situation with Timothy?

Q) What are your limitations as a church to being responsive to cries of help from both local and even international voices, and how might some of those limitations be overcome?

b) A rocky journey

(Read Acts 16:11-15, Acts 16:16-40, Acts 17:1-15)

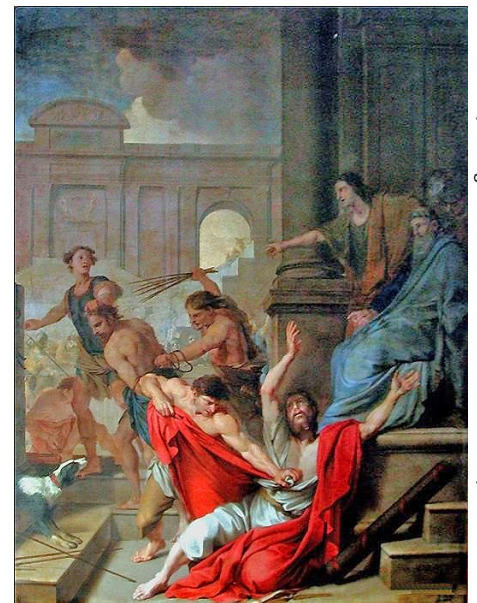
Luke is now part of the team that journey to the Roman colony of Philippi, in Macedonia. Normally on a Sabbath Paul would seek out the local synagogue, but Jewish law required a minimum of ten male heads of households, which Philippi lacked, so they find a riverbank and a group of women meeting for informal worship, hoping perhaps for a journeying Jewish teacher to pass by and offer a word of encouragement. What a coincidence!

As a result of their conversations, Paul's team are invited to Lydia's home, where she and several household members are baptised. From this small beginning a church at Philippi begins, and Lydia's home becomes a centre for outreach and worship.

Then life gets difficult, with Paul and team constantly interrupted by a slave girl following them around, shouting what initially seems to be free publicity, but eventually becomes a nuisance. Paul recognises this is not from God and calls out the spirit in her. We don't know if she becomes a believer, but those who make money from her are not happy, stirring up opposition, dragging Paul and Silas before the magistrates, who have them stripped, beaten, and placed in prison.

Imprisonment is short however, and after God's intervention their jailer becomes a believer, and the magistrates are embarrassed to hear they have treated Roman citizens so badly. It does however seem sensible for them to leave the city, but not before another visit to Lydia's house to encourage the local believers. They then make their way to Thessalonica and the local synagogue, where Paul shares, through words of Scripture, why the Jesus he speaks of is the Messiah.

Paul's message resonates with many God-fearing Greeks, a few Jews, and some women present. But other Jews stir up opposition, targeting a man called Jason, who had offered hospitality to the team. Paul and Silas slip away overnight to Berea, where the very same sequence of events unfolds. Paul then flees to the coast and then to Athens, while Silas and Timothy stay until it is safe to follow.



Louis Testelin, *La Flagellation de Saint-Paul et de Saint-Silas*, 1655

Q) What does the appearance of the Luke in Paul's team add to the continuing narrative, and why?

Q) Another difficult decision for Paul with the young slave girl. Is there a right or a wrong way to deal with those who might disrupt what we consider our 'normal' ways of being church?

Q) We are maybe used to thinking of Paul as a powerful and energetic leader of the early church, whose teaching through his letters we greatly appreciate. What do these passages say about him?

c) An unknown God

(Read Acts 17:16-34, Acts 18:1-11)

Athens was a necessary diversion from the original plan. It is suggested that Rome was Paul's intended destination, as he speaks of this in a letter (Romans 1:13; 15:22-23). Walking around the city, Paul sees nothing but idolatry, and a perfect opportunity to engage with its people while waiting for Silas and Timothy.

This was a lively and intellectual city which had once been home to Socrates, Plato, Aristotle, and other great thinkers of the past. Paul does not assume any knowledge of Jewish history or teaching when he is speaking to the Areopagus (possibly the senate or city council) focussing instead on an altar he passed earlier inscribed 'TO AN UNKNOWN GOD'.

Luke brings us a precis of Paul's speech, which begins on common ground and then emphasises that there is but one God, this world's creator and its life and breath, before moving on to talk of the uniqueness and importance of Jesus Christ in God's unfolding plan of salvation for humanity. He even quotes familiar words from Greek poets. Sadly, Paul does not convince the council, or most of those listening in the marketplace or synagogue, although we're told a few did

believe, and we even have the name of two. It has been suggested that as a mission, this might appear to have failed, but a seed was sown.

Paul moves on to Corinth, a city of maybe two hundred thousand, and in a later letter admits that he came 'in weakness and fear, and with much trembling' (1 Corinthians 2:3) suggesting his mood was low following the response in Athens and the continual opposition to his work. However, in Corinth Paul does find fellowship and work alongside two recent exiles and tentmakers from Rome, Aquila and Priscilla.

Reunited with Silas and Timothy, Paul struggles to convince the local Jews, to the point where he declares, 'From now on I will go to the Gentiles'. Soon afterwards we are told of Titus Justus and the synagogue leader Christus and family becoming believers. Encouraged by this and God's word, Paul stays in Corinth for eighteen months.

Q) How relevant is the altar 'TO AN UNKNOWN GOD' today, and where might you find it?

Q) Paul began his message on common ground. If you were thinking about your nearest town or city, is there something within that place (other than a church) that could spark a discussion about spiritual matters?

Q) Does a weak and trembling Paul add or detract from your opinion of him, and why might Aquila and Priscilla be so important at this time?

Paul on a theme of 'opposition'

'Who shall separate us from the love of Christ? Shall trouble or hardship or persecution or famine or nakedness or danger or sword? As it is written:

"For your sake we face death all day long;

we are considered as sheep to be slaughtered."

No, in all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us. For I am convinced that neither death nor life, neither angels nor demons, neither the present nor the future, nor any powers, neither height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus our Lord.' (Romans 8:35-39)

'And the Lord's servant must not be quarrelsome but must be kind to everyone, able to teach, not resentful. Opponents must be gently instructed, in the hope that God will grant them repentance leading them to a knowledge of the truth' (2 Timothy 2:24,25)

'Now I want you to know, brothers and sisters, that what has happened to me has actually served to advance the gospel. As a result, it has become clear throughout the whole palace guard and to everyone else that I am in chains for Christ. And because of my chains, most of the brothers and sisters have become confident in the Lord and dare all the more to proclaim the gospel without fear.' (Philippians 1:12-14)

A thought for prayer

Pray for the many millions of Christians in the world who are facing persecution for standing firm in their faith. (Advocacy group [Open Doors](#) quotes a figure of at least 360 million Christians experiencing 'high levels of persecution and discrimination' in 2022)

Study 4: Encouraging (c. AD 52-57)

Key verses

'Paul said, "John's baptism was a baptism of repentance. He told the people to believe in the one coming after him, that is, in Jesus." On hearing this, they were baptized in the name of the Lord Jesus. When Paul placed his hands on them, the Holy Spirit came on them, and they spoke in tongues and prophesied. There were about twelve men in all'
(Acts 19:4-7)



Façade of Celsus library, Ephesus, photo by Benh Lieu Song

a) A haircut and more travelling

(Read Acts 18:18-23, 19:1-12, 13-22, 1 Corinthians 16:5-11)

There was some legal wrangling over Paul's right to continue his mission in Corinth, but this was resolved locally, enabling Paul to continue his work before setting sail with Priscilla and Aquila to Ephesus. They may have been expanding their business, whilst Paul had promising discussions with Jews in the synagogue, promising to return when time, and God, allowed.

Paul also had a haircut! This arose because of a Nazirite vow which had ended, and his hair would now be presented, along with a sacrificial offering, at a feast time in Jerusalem (Numbers 6:1-5). Luke does not elaborate on this practice, but it does point to Paul's continuing sense of his 'Jewishness'.

His next stop was the port of Caesarea and then to Jerusalem, with time to complete his vow before proceeding three hundred miles north to Syrian Antioch, and to his commissioning church.

Around AD 53, Paul sets out on what is commonly called his third missionary journey, returning to Ephesus, a centre for the worship of Artemis, the goddess of fertility, whose temple was one of the Seven Wonders of the

ancient world. His aim was to encourage and strengthen the Christian disciples there, and he finds at least one group lacking in basic knowledge about the Holy Spirit, an issue which was quickly resolved!

Paul was engaged in mission in Ephesus for some time, with Luke only giving us a precis of what happened there. He tried engaging with the Jews in the synagogue, but after three months, and faced with an obstinate audience Paul took the believers to a different venue to continue his work, and with great success, spreading the Gospel message among both Greeks and Jews throughout the area.

It is generally believed that Paul dictated his first letter to the Corinthians in Ephesus, possibly with Sosthenes as scribe (1 Cor 1:1). As well educated as he was, Paul admitted to having poor writing skills (Galatians 6:11).

Eventually, he considers the time is right to move on, toward Macedonia and Jerusalem, and from there to Rome, sending two of his helpers, Timothy and Erastus, ahead of him.

Q) What does the mention of the haircut tell us about both Paul and Luke, for whom this must have been an important part of his narrative?

Q) How important to you are the roots of your faith; the family, place, denomination or wherever your faith journey has its origins?

Q) Paul tried hard with the Jews in the synagogue, before taking his mission into the community. Does mission need a degree of flexibility in its planning, and where is the best place to centre such work?

b) Pastoral concerns

(Read Acts 20:1-12; 2 Corinthians 1:15-17; 2 Corinthians 2:1-4; 2 Corinthians 7:8-12)



Saint Paul Writing, Pier Francesco Sacchi, c.1520

Before Paul left Ephesus there were riots stirred up by those making money out of the 'old ways' of worshipping Artemis, but these were calmed down by quick-thinking allies of Paul and the assistance of the city clerk. Writing later, Paul tells us that Priscilla and Aquila risked their lives for him (Romans 16:4) and admits that he had faced deadly peril in Asia (2 Corinthians 1:8-11).

Travelling toward Greece, Paul spends useful time encouraging believers he meets along the way, staying at Corinth for three months where his letter to the church in Rome is written. He also considers travelling as far west as Spain, with Rome as his operational base (Romans 15:24). From Corinth, a change of route was needed because of another Jewish plot, so rather than travel by sea, Paul and his team take an overland route through Macedonia and then to Jerusalem.

We know very little about this period of Paul's ministry, other than by references in his letters, but Luke's use of 'we' suggests he was there as well, along with Timothy and other helpers. Luke records an evening meeting to break bread, when a young man falls asleep listening to Paul talking, and tumbles from the upstairs window to his apparent death, only to be embraced by Paul who tells them, 'Don't be alarmed, he's alive!'

From Paul's letters we gather that he had intended revisiting Corinth, but plans were changed due to another 'painful visit' made there, mentioned in a lost letter (2 Corinthians 4:4). This was a tricky decision for Paul to make, not wanting people to think he was putting his own interests above those of the church. It appears to have been a dispute stirred up by an individual, which was less about doctrine or theology, and more about Paul's authority.

The church did eventually deal with the matter, and we read that this missing letter led to repentance and reconciliation among the believers.

Q) Mission work is not only about those at the front. Paul was fortunate to have a team who did their best to keep him safe from harm. In what way is teamwork important in the day-to-day life of our churches?

Q) How important is 'encouragement' in the life of the church, and how can it best be shown?

Q) Sometimes tricky decisions must be made, in our lives and within our churches. Is there a right or wrong way to handle such situations as they arise?

c) The journey continues

(Read Acts 20:13-24, Acts 21:1-19)

Paul's companions take a coastal vessel bound for Assos (in Turkey) to meet up with Paul, who had spent time onshore at Troas before walking south to meet them. Three days later they arrive at Miletus, south of Ephesus.

Paul had decided not to revisit Ephesus, possibly to avoid conflict with the local Jewish population. However, he does invite the elders of the Ephesian church to visit him at Miletus, reminding them of all he had done and suffered whilst ministering to them, and explaining that now was the time for his return to Jerusalem to face whatever might happen to him there. His aim is to finish the race and complete his calling, that of testifying to the good news of God's grace and declaring to both Jews and Greeks that 'they must turn to God in repentance and have faith in our Lord Jesus'.

Paul knew in his heart that he would probably not see these people again and encourages the elders to take care of themselves and their flock, to be 'shepherds of the church of God which he bought by his own blood' (Acts 21:28).

Setting sail again, passing Kos, Rhodes, and Cyprus, they continue to Syria and land at Tyre where they stay seven days. In the words of Luke, Paul's journey to Jerusalem follows a similar pattern to that of Jesus. There will be a

Jewish plot, a handing over to the Gentiles, a prediction of suffering and a steadfast resolve to let God's will be done, which to Luke is a similar picture to that of the Suffering Servant.

However, we read that Paul and team receive a warm welcome as they arrive in Jerusalem, and he shares his news with James and the elders.

(You may notice a sword in artwork featuring Paul. Traditionally this is associated with the means of his death, but could also symbolise the Word of God which he talks about in Ephesians 6:13-16)



Rembrandt, St Paul in Prison, 1627

Q) What do you make of Paul's decision to call the Ephesian elders to him, rather than visit the city personally?

Q) Any work of mission has its highs and lows. For Paul these might seem extreme, but how are they reflected in our own experiences of mission, small or larger scale?

Q) In his various missionary journeys, Paul travelled around 10,000 miles, each journey more costly as his use of ships increased. Wherever he was, he engaged with both Jews and Gentiles, making friends and enemies along the road. How do you view Paul's influence on the spread of Christianity throughout the world?

Paul on a theme of 'Salvation'

'But Christ has indeed been raised from the dead, the first fruits of those who have fallen asleep. For since death came through a man, the resurrection of the dead comes also through a man.' (1 Cor 15:20-21)

'If you declare with your mouth, "Jesus is Lord," and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved. For it is with your heart that you believe and are justified, and it is with your mouth that you profess your faith and are saved.' (Romans 10:9-10)

'For I am not ashamed of the gospel, because it is the power of God that brings salvation to everyone who believes: first to the Jew, then to the Gentile.' (Romans 1:16)

'But because of his great love for us, God, who is rich in mercy, made us alive with Christ even when we were dead in transgressions—it is by grace you have been saved.' (Ephesians 2:4-5)

'But now that you have been set free from sin and have become slaves of God, the benefit you reap leads to holiness, and the result is eternal life. For the wages of sin is death, but the gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord.' (Romans 6:22-23)

A thought for prayer

Pray for all those who have followed a calling to become leaders within the Church of God, and have pastoral responsibilities within a local fellowship, or indeed further afield. May they display through their words and actions the love, compassion and grace of God.

Study 5: Rome and beyond (c. AD 53-67)

Key verses

'Some in the crowd shouted one thing and some another, and since the commander could not get at the truth because of the uproar, he ordered that Paul be taken into the barracks. When Paul reached the steps, the violence of the mob was so great he had to be carried by the soldiers. The crowd that followed kept shouting, "Get rid of him!"'
(Acts 21:34-36)



Gustave Doré, Paul Addresses the Crowd After His Arrest

a) Walking into trouble

(Read Acts 21:27-40; Acts 23:12-21)

Having met up with James and the elders in Jerusalem, Paul gives a full account of his ministry among the Gentiles. He then joins with four Jewish Christians fulfilling their Nazarite vows, which meant Paul taking part in a seven-day ritual of purification.

Toward the end of this period the trouble begins yet again, as Jews from Asia recognise Paul and spread the word that Paul deliberately brought a Gentile into the temple courts reserved for Jews. Inscriptions found in the temple state 'No foreigner is to enter within the balustrade and embankment around the sanctuary. Whoever is caught will have himself to blame for his death which follows'. Only the appearance of the Roman commander stops a crowd from lynching and killing Paul, who finds himself in chains.

Paul is given permission to speak to the crowd, and in chapter 22 he presents his story again; of the Saul he was, a persecutor of 'followers of this Way', his experience on the road to

Damascus, and his calling whilst in prayer at the temple where God told him 'Go; I will send you far away to the Gentiles.'

The crowd are not interested, and only Paul's Roman citizenship stops him from being flogged on the spot. Instead, Paul is brought before the Sanhedrin, where he insists that he was simply fulfilling God's instruction. This does nothing to help his defence, so to keep him safe, Paul is taken to the local barracks, and in our second reading we have a conspiracy worthy of a crime novel, and another plot to kill Paul.

In a strange twist in the story, we hear of Paul's nephew hearing about this plot and visiting him at the barracks, where Paul arranges a meeting between his nephew and the local commander. As a result, Paul receives a large armed guard to provide safe passage to Caesarea and a meeting with Felix, the Governor. Another privilege of Roman citizenship!

Q) Paul entered Jerusalem knowing his future was uncertain, and opposition from the Jews in the city was a real issue. Yet he is content to be diverted by the Jewish Christians and their Nazarite vows. What does this say to us about Paul and his calling?

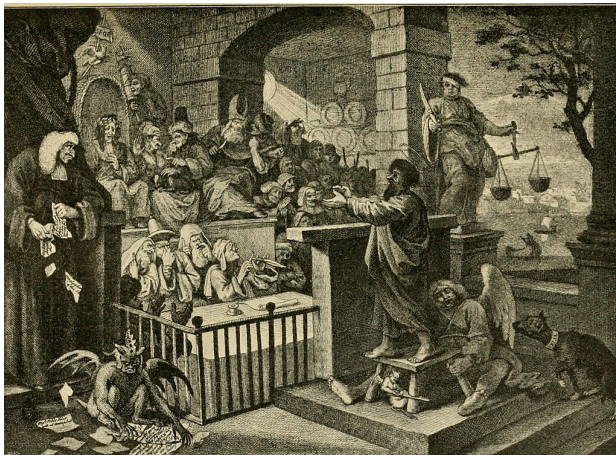
Q) The accusation against Paul is based on hearsay, rather than fact, whereas Paul's defence is strong. So, what might be the underlying problem with accepting Paul's teaching, and is it easy to be so entrenched in our own ways of being 'church' that we are deaf to change?

Q) Paul has a solid testimony of his life before and after that encounter on the road to Damascus, his calling, and how God has used him since. How important could our own testimonies be, if shared more openly?

b) Caesarea and Caesar

(Read Acts 23:23-35; 24:22-27; 25:1-12)

Paul before Felix, by William Hogarth, 1910



Governor Felix was based in Herod's grand palace at Caesarea. Five days after Paul arrives, Ananias, along with elders and a lawyer bring their charges against him, and we now find Paul labelled as a ringleader of the Nazarene sect who had attempted to desecrate the temple.

Paul presents a good case for his defence, and Felix has some sympathy with him, allowing Paul a measure of freedom and access to his friends. However, any interest Felix might have in Paul's teaching are clouded by the knowledge that he was ever hopeful of a bribe. This does not happen, and therefore Paul is left in prison, just as

Felix is moved on (according to Josephus because of his poor handling of hostility between Jews and Greeks at Caesarea).

It has been suggested that during what was a two-year period, Luke might have made profitable use of his own available time by gathering his thoughts about Paul and the early church in Jerusalem, and familiarising himself with material relevant to the story of Jesus, that might later be incorporated into his own published writings.

Luke gives us a very brief account of Paul appearing before the new governor Festus at the request of the chief priests and elders, who ask that Paul be transferred to Jerusalem (another opportunity to kill Paul whilst in transit), but instead, Festus convenes a court in Caesarea. Luke tells us that none of the charges made against Paul could be proved. When asked if he'd be willing to go to Jerusalem, as requested by the Jews, Paul demands the right to appeal to Caesar, to which Festus shrugs his shoulders and says, 'To Caesar you will go!', a decision which is not altered even after conversations with the neighbouring King Agrippa.

Q) We may not always consider how our New Testament gospels and letters are interconnected, both in message and by the people involved in their writing. How can this enhance our understanding of the Bible?

Q) Paul is accused of being a 'ringleader of the Nazarene sect' by the lawyer Tertullus (24:5) but the governor Felix is 'well acquainted with the Way', and happy to hear what Paul has to say... up to a point! Where are the stumbling points found in your own experience?

Q) We find verses where the Roman authorities were keen to please everyone (25:9), here Festus with the Jews. In your own country, how do you view the relationship between church and state?

c) A stormy journey to Rome

(Read Acts 26:19-32; 27:1-2,39-44; 28:11-20,30-31)

Paul had many opportunities to state his case, that of a call from God to 'bring the message of light to his own people and to the Gentiles', and despite Festus calling him insane, Paul's confidence is unshaken in front of King Agrippa, as he prays that 'not only he but all who are listening to me today may become what I am, except for these chains' (26:29). In a private conversation later, Agrippa tells Festus that if Paul hadn't insisted on seeing Caesar, he could have been set free.



Laurent de La Hyre's Paul Shipwrecked on Malta, 1630

Paul and friends set sail towards Rome, with Luke displaying an excellent knowledge of seamanship and conditions around the eastern Mediterranean. When the weather turns against them, Paul promises that all on board will have God's protection, even after a fierce storm leaves them shipwrecked on the island of Malta. Here they remain for three months until conditions are suitable for sailing again, possibly in an overwintering grain ship from Egypt. With the help of Christians along the way, they arrive at Rome where Paul, still under arrest, is allowed a measure of freedom, though possibly chained at the wrist (28:20).

Luke suggests that there was considerable interest among the Jews about 'this sect' that Paul was involved with (28:22), and this allowed him ample opportunity to talk to whoever came to see him, and correct any misinformation about his teaching that had been circulating.

Paul expected to be released when he stood before Caesar. Writing to Philemon, he ends the short letter by saying, 'And one thing more: Prepare a guest room for me, because I hope to be restored to you in answer to your prayers.' After his release, he evangelized in the eastern part of the empire, possibly even visiting Spain (Romans 15:23-24), until we read sad news of a second arrest (2 Timothy 4:6-18), and Paul resigned to an outcome which, according to tradition, was beheading by the order of Nero around AD 67.

Q) Paul could have been set free if he wasn't so keen on going to Caesar. He had changed his plans previously, so do you think knowledge of this would have made any difference?

Q) There was misinformation being shared regarding Paul's teaching about Jesus Christ. How much is misinformation about Christianity an issue today, and where is it found?

Q) What does Luke's account of Paul in Acts have to say to you regarding the way the church, local or national, should plan mission?

Paul on a theme of 'The Holy Spirit'

'Therefore, there is now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus, because through Christ Jesus the law of the Spirit who gives life has set you free from the law of sin and death.'
(Romans 8:1-2)

'For this reason I remind you to fan into flame the gift of God, which is in you through the laying on of my hands. For the Spirit God gave us does not make us timid, but gives us power, love and self-discipline.' (2 Timothy 1:6-7)

'Those who live according to the flesh have their minds set on what the flesh desires; but those who live in accordance with the Spirit have their minds set on what the Spirit desires.'
(Romans 8:5)

'But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, forbearance, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control. Against such things there is no law.' (Ephesians 5:22-23)

'And if the Spirit of him who raised Jesus from the dead is living in you, he who raised Christ from the dead will also give life to your mortal bodies because of his Spirit who lives in you.'
(Romans 8:11)

A thought for prayer

Pray for all who live out their faith day by day, unafraid of standing up for what they believe, despite the potential consequences for friendships, family or career.

Paul's journeys

The traditional layout of Paul's journeys, including the final one to Rome



Visio Divina

There are quite a few images within these studies, and you may like to try this way to use them prayerfully.

It is called Visio Divina, or 'Divine seeing' and all it requires is a few minutes of quiet, while we look at the images, what the artist might say to us, even putting ourselves into the artwork, and allowing God to speak to us. Here is an image you might like to begin with. The stages are the same.



Pietro da Cortona, Ananias restoring the sight of Saint Paul, 1631

The four stages of Visio Divina are as follows:

1. Look at the picture slowly, noting the colours, people, places, and things. Start in one corner and work your way around it. Remain with the image for one to two minutes. If you would like, jot down a few words about what you see, particularly anything you missed at first glance.
2. Take a second, deeper, look. Where is there movement? What relationships do you see? Engage your imagination. Where might you be within the picture? What do you see from that perspective? What deeper meaning emerges?
3. Respond to the image with prayer. Did the image remind you of an experience, person or issue for which you'd like to offer thanksgiving or intercession? Offer that prayer to God.
4. Be still. Breathe deeply. Relax your shoulders, arms, and legs. Rest in this quietness and let God speak.

References

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