

PAUL HAD A SISTER

Lately you have been hearing a lot of information about the Apostle Paul that most people do not know, or at least things most people have never “put together.” To be sure, some of you have enjoyed and appreciated that more; some less. But that’s not my problem; it’s not my side of the street. I only wish I had *more* information and *more* stories to tell you about Paul. Well, I haven’t said it all – not by a long shot. Recently, for instance, we talked about how Paul took a large offering from Corinth to Jerusalem without getting robbed or murdered, or both. And we saw graphically how cagey and astute Paul was in ducking and dodging the thieves and assassins who were after him. Still, is it not incredible – or maybe “unbelievable” would be more accurate – that Paul made it to Jerusalem in one piece? So what would we guess I wasn’t saying? Of course: The Holy Spirit was whispering all along the way: “Wait a day.” “Go now, tonight.” “Take this ship.” “Go by land now.” And Paul was listening and taking the hints. We know he was; it was his way of life. Thus it wasn’t just the robbers and assassins against Paul – it was against Paul *and* the Holy Spirit. Otherwise the story makes no sense. But you all picked that up, didn’t you? And if you picked it up with Paul, don’t lay it down when it comes to your own life.

As some of you do remember, Paul’s encounter on the Damascus Road is, for me, a pivotal passage for the entire New Testament Message. I don’t mean to sidetrack anything away from Jesus – His life and ministry among us; His death and resurrection. Clearly, apart from that, we have no Message. But Paul is the clearest recipient of the Message. He sees more of its implications and repercussions than anyone else of his time. Paul, though at first an enemy of the new WAY, runs smack dab into the reality and power of the Risen Lord – the Messiah, the Christ – who intends to keep appearing to His people: turning doubters into followers, and turning all of us who are willing to receive Him into apostles and messengers, one way or another.

The Damascus Road encounter turns it all from a third-person curiosity into a first-person Way of Life. Toward the end of Paul’s life, we hear this much-loved comment: *“I have fought the good fight, I have finished the race, I have kept the faith. Henceforth there is laid up for me the crown of righteousness, which the Lord, the righteous judge, will*

award to me on that day, and not only to me but also to all who have loved his appearing.” (II Timothy 4:7-8)

Numerous biblical scholars have concluded that Second Timothy, as it now stands, is not a genuine letter from Paul. I wouldn't even mention this except I know that some of you have heard this. So you also need to know that many of these scholars also conclude that while we don't have the full letter as Paul wrote it, we do have portions of a letter Paul did write to Timothy. The alternate scenario goes something like this: When this letter was found, with pieces missing from the papyrus, a disciple of Paul's filled in the missing portions to the best of his ability. Of course, he could not match Paul's style or perspective exactly.

Such things still happen, by the way. G.B. Caird died suddenly on Easter Eve in 1984. Along with the shock and sadness of his family and friends and numerous students, there eventually came the realization that they would not be able to read the book Caird was working on when he died – his *NEW TESTAMENT THEOLOGY*. Most of them had heard about it. Caird intended to imagine all the writers of the New Testament sitting around a table together. He would then ask some of the important and puzzling questions of New Testament theology, and imagine each one speaking to the questions according to what would be consistent with what each had written. Caird had died with the book only half written, yet with many notes on the chapters still to come. His friend L.D. Hurst, now a full professor himself, undertook to finish the book as closely as he could to what he thought Caird had wanted to say. L.D. Hurst did a wonderful job. But did he really capture what Caird wanted to say – especially in the most important closing chapters, when Caird proposed to tell us what he thought Jesus would have to say about such things? I doubt it. In a very similar fashion, we read Second Timothy.

Second Timothy does seem to come from a time late in Paul's life, sounding like it's close to the last days just prior to his trial before the Roman Emperor. However, the case will not come before Claudius, who has now been poisoned. The new Roman Emperor is Nero. Paul had very much hoped that his trial would exonerate Christianity in the eyes of the Emperor himself, thus paving the way for the peaceful spread of Christianity throughout the Empire. But it is not to be. Paul has already used up more than his nine lives. Christianity will grow strong following its Lord into suffering and death. Only in America do Christians think they will grow strong following their Lord into privilege, pampering, and plenty.

Who knows; it might work – if only we could talk our Lord into going into such places.

But I draw your attention to the last phrase of the passage: “*not only to me but also to all who have loved his appearing.*” Though the setting is one of earthly defeat and disaster, the tone is one of triumph and joy. To lose here in this life is no great loss at all from Paul’s perspective. Clearly he is eager for the next realm. But he does not feel at all alone in this prospect. And who does Paul include and rejoice with most? Others who, like him, have encountered the Risen Christ – others who have loved Jesus’ appearing. He is not in any way denying Easter or Pentecost or indeed any of the hope and power of the Christian story. But specifically and especially he is rejoicing in those who have had an encounter with the Risen Lord something like the one he himself had on the Damascus Road. And the implication, to put it as gently as I can, is that Paul now knows a considerable host of fellow Christians who have had such experiences. They also have loved His appearing. And so, as I tell you often: Christianity does not end in Easter, though many still try to preach it and teach it that way. Christianity blooms and goes on and invites us all – in Pentecost. We are *all* invited into a relationship with the Holy Spirit of our Risen Lord.

But I need to get to today’s story. In this case, a lot of it is told clearly and well by Luke in the Book of Acts (21:15-23:5). We pick up as Paul and his companions are arriving in Jerusalem with the offering, at the end of Paul’s third missionary journey. This will be Paul’s last visit to Jerusalem. And not wanting to interrupt the flow once we get started, please note that the second word is “we,” not “they.” Luke is present in person. This is his firsthand account.

When we had come to Jerusalem, the brothers received us gladly. On the following day Paul went in with us to James, and all the elders were present. After greeting them, he related one by one the things that God had done among the Gentiles through his ministry. And when they heard it, they glorified God. And they said to him, “You see, brother, how many thousands there are among the Jews of those who have believed. They are all zealous for the law, and they have been told about you that you teach all the Jews who are among the Gentiles to forsake Moses, telling them not to circumcise their children or walk according to our customs. What then is to be done? They will certainly hear that you have come. Do therefore what we tell you. We have four men who are under a vow; take these men and purify yourself along with them and pay their

expenses, so that they may shave their heads. Thus all will know that there is nothing in what they have been told about you, but that you yourself also live in observance of the law. But as for the Gentiles who have believed, we have sent a letter with our judgment that they should abstain from what has been sacrificed to idols, and from blood, and from what has been strangled, and from sexual immorality.” Then Paul took the men, and the next day he purified himself along with them and went into the temple, giving notice when the days of purification would be fulfilled and the offering presented for each one of them.

When the seven days were almost completed, the Jews from Asia, seeing him in the temple, stirred up the whole crowd and laid hands on him, crying out, “Men of Israel, help! This is the man who is teaching everyone everywhere against the people and the law and this place. Moreover, he even brought Greeks into the temple and has defiled this holy place.” For they had previously seen Trophimus the Ephesian with him in the city, and they supposed that Paul had brought him into the temple. Then all the city was stirred up, and the people ran together. They seized Paul and dragged him out of the temple, and at once the gates were shut. And as they were seeking to kill him, word came to the tribune of the cohort that all Jerusalem was in confusion. He at once took soldiers and centurions and ran down to them. And when they saw the tribune and the soldiers, they stopped beating Paul. Then the tribune came up and arrested him and ordered him to be bound with two chains. He inquired who he was and what he had done. Some in the crowd were shouting one thing, some another. And as he could not learn the facts because of the uproar, he ordered him to be brought into the barracks. And when Paul came to the steps, he was actually carried by the soldiers because of the violence of the crowd, for the mob of the people followed, crying out, “Away with him!”

As Paul was about to be brought into the barracks, he said to the tribune, “May I say something to you?” And he said, “Do you know Greek? Are you not the Egyptian, then, who recently stirred up a revolt and led the four thousand men of the Assassins out into the wilderness?” Paul replied, “I am a Jew, from Tarsus in Cilicia, a citizen of no obscure city. I beg you, permit me to speak to the people.” And when he had given him permission, Paul, standing on the steps, motioned with his hand to the people. And when there was a great hush, he addressed them in the Hebrew language, saying:

“Brothers and fathers, hear the defense that I now make before you.” And when they heard that he was addressing them in the Hebrew language, they became even more quiet. And he said: “I am a Jew, born in Tarsus in Cilicia, but brought up in this city, educated at the feet of Gamaliel according to the strict manner of the law of our fathers, being zealous for God as all of you are this day. I persecuted this Way to the death, binding and delivering to prison both men and women, as the high priest and the whole council of elders can bear me witness. From them I received letters to the brothers, and I journeyed toward Damascus to take those also who were there and bring them in bonds to Jerusalem to be punished.

“As I was on my way and drew near to Damascus, about noon a great light from heaven suddenly shone around me. And I fell to the ground and heard a voice saying to me, ‘Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting me?’ And I answered, ‘Who are you, Lord?’ And he said to me, ‘I am Jesus of Nazareth, whom you are persecuting.’ Now those who were with me saw the light but did not understand the voice of the one who was speaking to me. And I said, ‘What shall I do, Lord?’ And the Lord said to me, ‘Rise, and go into Damascus, and there you will be told all that is appointed for you to do.’ And since I could not see because of the brightness of that light, I was led by the hand by those who were with me, and came into Damascus.

“And one Ananias, a devout man according to the law, well spoken of by all the Jews who lived there, came to me, and standing by me said to me, ‘Brother Saul, receive your sight.’ And at that very hour I received my sight and saw him. And he said, ‘The God of our fathers appointed you to know his will, to see the Righteous One and to hear a voice from his mouth; for you will be a witness for him to everyone of what you have seen and heard. And now why do you wait? Rise and be baptized and wash away your sins, calling on his name.’

“When I had returned to Jerusalem and was praying in the temple, I fell into a trance and saw him saying to me, ‘Make haste and get out of Jerusalem quickly, because they will not accept your testimony about me.’ And I said, ‘Lord, they themselves know that in one synagogue after another I imprisoned and beat those who believed in you. And when the blood of Stephen your witness was being shed, I myself was standing by and approving and watching over the garments of those who killed him.’ And he said to me, ‘Go, for I will send you far away to the Gentiles.’”
[The trigger! “Gentiles” will set the mob off again.]

Up to this word they listened to him. Then they raised their voices and said, "Away with such a fellow from the earth! For he should not be allowed to live." And as they were shouting and throwing off their cloaks and flinging dust into the air, the tribune ordered Paul to be brought into the barracks, saying that he should be examined by flogging, to find out why they were shouting against him like this. But when they had stretched him out for the whips, Paul said to the centurion who was standing by, "Is it lawful for you to flog a man who is a Roman citizen and uncondemned?" When the centurion heard this, he went to the tribune and said to him, "What are you about to do? For this man is a Roman citizen." So the tribune came and said to him, "Tell me, are you a Roman citizen?" And he said, "Yes." The tribune answered, "I bought this citizenship for a large sum." Paul said, "But I am a citizen by birth." So those who were about to examine him withdrew from him immediately, and the tribune also was afraid, for he realized that Paul was a Roman citizen and that he had bound him.

But on the next day, desiring to know the real reason why Paul was being accused by the Jews, he unbound him and commanded the chief priests and all the council to meet, and he brought Paul down and set him before them. And looking intently at the council, Paul said, "Brothers, I have lived my life before God in all good conscience up to this day." And the high priest Ananias [not the same Ananias who came to him in Damascus] commanded those who stood by him to strike him on the mouth. Then Paul said to him, "God is going to strike you, you white-washed wall! Are you sitting to judge me according to the law, and yet contrary to the law you order me to be struck?" Those who stood by said, "Would you revile God's high priest?" And Paul said, "I did not know, brothers, that he was the high priest, for it is written, 'You shall not speak evil of a ruler of your people.'"

Okay, fascinating story – and stories within stories. It leaves many of us with some questions, most of which I cannot answer. There's a huge riot, Paul's life hangs on a thread, and along the way we hear about Paul's conversion on the Damascus Road. That's the big stuff. But from time to time, without minimizing any of that in any way, I also find myself contemplating a much less dramatic side to Paul's experience on the Damascus Road. That is, I sometimes wonder what the personal repercussions must have been like for Paul in regard to his family. What did his conversion do to his relationships with Jewish relatives and friends? Why didn't he keep a journal during the ten to thirteen

years he spent in Tarsus shortly after his conversion? Did he never mention such things to Luke? Or did Luke simply not have the time or any real reason to include such information in his narratives, when there were so many more important things to cover?

Anyway, to our knowledge Paul never married. Many have speculated about that, often with what seem to me like very dense filters. It was normal for most Jewish men to marry and, from what we can piece together, to marry at a fairly young age (eighteen to twenty-two). It seems clear and obvious to me that Jesus did not marry because it would have been a cruel thing, both for His wife and for any young children they had, to leave a family fatherless so soon.

Paul, we suspect, had been influenced in his view on marriage by Jesus' example. We also know, because he said so point-blank, that Paul expected the "end of the age" within a very few years. So he also believed that starting a family was impatient foolishness. "Wait for the New Kingdom, then start a family in a much better place, with a much better future." He advised the same for all Christians who would listen to him, though he also made it very clear that there was no sin or shame for those who decide to marry now.

Sorry for the details; just trying to clear some unnecessary confusion. But having said all that, I am still left with wonderment about the close friends and relatives that Paul must have surprised – and no doubt greatly displeased – by his sudden and dramatic conversion to the Christian Faith.

We know, for instance, that Paul had been a rabbinical student who studied under Gamaliel, a rabbi of enormous reputation and distinction. (Hillel had an even greater reputation, but that's about it.) This, in turn, means that Paul's parents (who lived in Tarsus, of course) had sent Paul to Jerusalem, probably about age twelve or maybe thirteen – and at great expense – so that he could be thus schooled. And it is hardly guesswork to suppose that they had seen their son as a very promising young man, and hoped he would become a well-respected, if not a famous, rabbi in his own right. (Acts 5)

Some would claim at this point that Paul had not learned very quickly from his famous teacher. That is, Gamaliel had a much more mature and wise attitude (from our perspective, at least) to Christians than Paul had. Paul had been a young firebrand; he wanted to stamp out the Christian danger: the heresy – the threat to Jewish ways and beliefs.

Gamaliel knew that Judaism could not be so easily eradicated. So he was patient and philosophical about the new movement.

In any case, what would have been the reaction of Paul's parents when Paul suddenly did a turnaround and went off into the scurvy little fly-by-night camp of the Christians? Did that not dash all their hopes and dreams and ambitions for their obviously brilliant and gifted son? What was Paul thinking?! How could he be so foolish?

Did Paul also have dear friends who were greatly upset and saddened by this strange turn of events? Did they try to reach him, argue with him, plead with him? I don't know if Paul had any biological brothers. No hint of any makes me doubt it.

I am nonetheless enthralled to realize that Paul had a sister. I have a sister. We have been far closer than most siblings all these many years. Yet our paths have been far from identical. Sometimes when we have been reminiscing about our memories of growing up, we have laughed and said, "Too bad we didn't have the same father and mother, or grow up in the same church, or go to the same schools, or live in the same community!" And of course we did. But to hear us describe them, you would think they were entirely different.

So I wonder what it was like between Paul and his sister. And especially I wonder what she thought when Paul became a Christian. After all, Paul didn't just become an "anything goes," everybody-do-your-own-thing kind of Christian. Paul became Jesus' man through and through.

Well, we do pick up a few hints from this story of Paul on his last visit to Jerusalem. First of all, Paul's mere presence causes one of the greatest riots Jerusalem had ever seen. That gives us solid information about how Jewish/Christian relations are going at this time. Over forty men have taken an oath to kill (assassinate, murder) Paul in cold blood before they eat or drink any more food or water. Remember, these are *seriously* religious men – all of them sworn to obey Torah to the death (their own deaths; not Paul's). It is their great devotion to Torah – and the Jewish Way – that has made them this murderous, even though Torah does say, "Thou shalt not kill." Of course, it isn't really murder if it's the will of God, wouldn't you agree? In any case, they are all so angry and threatened by Paul that they cannot see straight. It is a very religious vow they have taken, and for very religious reasons.

Next we notice that these same men appeal to the religious leaders of Judaism (we are in Jerusalem, the heart and core of Judaism). They appeal to their religious leaders to help them accomplish their purpose. And their purpose is to murder Paul. These leaders agree to appeal to the Roman officials to have Paul brought out of the Roman barracks – so that he can be murdered. Certainly we are reminded of some of the principles and emotions that swirled around Jesus' death. Paul has caught and followed enough of the Spirit of His Lord that his own life has many uncanny comparisons.

Into this picture walks the son of Paul's sister: Paul's nephew. We have not heard one whisper about the existence of either one of them ever before. Nor will we hear any comment about either one of them ever again. That is, Paul's sister and his nephew are not Christians – they are not traveling companions of Paul. Perhaps he visited them sometimes when he journeyed through Tarsus, but we don't know. Are they in Jerusalem for the Passover? Or perhaps they now live in Jerusalem. That's probably our best guess, since Paul's nephew knows what's going on more than he would if he were only visiting.

But one thing we do know: They still care about Paul. It has been twenty-three or twenty-four years since Paul's conversion, and we know how busy he's been with his Christian missions. Yet they still care about Paul enough to want to save his life – even if, as is likely, they think of him as an enemy of Judaism.

Next we have to notice that Paul's nephew *does* know about the plot to assassinate Paul. There is no way he would have known about this plot if there was any suspicion in anyone's mind that he was a Christian. The fact that Paul's nephew is able to warn Paul about this plot is convincing proof that his sister and nephew are totally in the Jewish camp, and not in any way sympathetic to the Christian movement. Yet they still love Paul, even though he has been a Christian and estranged from his family, at least over religious issues, for twenty-four years now.

Finally I think we should notice that this son of Paul's sister is risking his life to save Paul. If any hint leaks out that this nephew has revealed the assassination plot to the Roman centurion, how long do you think he will stay alive? There are at least forty of his fellow Jews who will slit his throat in a heartbeat if anybody has seen him, heard him, or caught wind of what he is doing. This is some nephew! "*Greater love hath no man than this*" And he isn't even a Christian.

Fascinating little ripples surround this story. Fortunately, the Roman centurion is efficient and effective (and close-mouthed). He sends Paul under a huge armed guard – both cavalry and foot soldiers – out of Jerusalem and on to Caesarea, the strongest and safest Roman garrison in all Palestine. Paul will be there under house arrest for two years. Then, because Paul is a Roman citizen – and to keep from being sent back to Jerusalem, where he knows the assassins are waiting for him – Paul will appeal to Caesar, and he will be sent to Rome to stand trial before the Emperor.

So what do you think? How could the bonds still have been so strong between Paul and his family? Why were they willing to risk their lives to save his? And what would have happened to our story if Paul had not had a sister? (Hence, no nephew.) We are never completely certain about such musings. Clearly, apart from this nephew, Paul would have died in Jerusalem in A.D. 57, at least eight years earlier than he did. I suspect that our New Testament would then be missing some of my favorite books: Luke, Acts, Romans, Philippians. It would also be missing First and Second Timothy, and Titus.

I do not even know this nephew's name, or the name of Paul's sister. But without his surprising act of great courage and love, there would be a huge hole in what I consider to be the most important records in the world. I cannot even imagine how that would have impacted my life, these two thousand years later. Yet it seems clear to me that Paul's nephew couldn't have had any idea how much depended on his deed those many years ago. How much of it was the quiet support and influence of the Holy Spirit? Did this nephew die wondering if he had ever done anything important in his life? I hope we get a chance, in the realms to come, to line up to hug and thank him.

Having come this far, perhaps we should read the rest of the passage that tells this story (Acts 23:12-22):

When it was day, the Jews made a plot and bound themselves by an oath neither to eat nor drink till they had killed Paul. There were more than forty who made this conspiracy. They went to the chief priests and elders and said, "We have strictly bound ourselves by an oath to taste no food till we have killed Paul. Now therefore you, along with the council, give notice to the tribune to bring him down to you, as though you were going to determine his case more exactly. And we are ready to kill him before he comes near."

Now the son of Paul's sister heard of their ambush, so he went and entered the barracks and told Paul. Paul called one of the centurions and said, "Take this young man to the tribune, for he has something to tell him." So he took him and brought him to the tribune and said, "Paul the prisoner called me and asked me to bring this young man to you, as he has something to say to you." The tribune took him by the hand, and going aside asked him privately, "What is it that you have to tell me?" And he said, "The Jews have agreed to ask you to bring Paul down to the council tomorrow, as though they were going to inquire somewhat more closely about him. But do not be persuaded by them, for more than forty of their men are lying in ambush for him, who have bound themselves by an oath neither to eat nor drink till they have killed him. And now they are ready, waiting for your consent." So the tribune dismissed the young man, charging him, "Tell no one that you have informed me of these things."

Then he called two of the centurions and said, "Get ready two hundred soldiers, with seventy horsemen and two hundred spearmen to go as far as Caesarea at the third hour of the night. Also provide mounts for Paul to ride and bring him safely to Felix the governor."

Clearly Claudius Lysias, the tribune, realizes how serious the assassination plot is. Interesting that we even know his name. It would have been a serious matter if a Roman citizen was assassinated while under his protection. He takes no chances. The escort is phenomenal – more protection than most presidents get. Two centurions for one maneuver, plus two hundred soldiers, seventy cavalry, and two hundred spearmen. And Paul is put on a horse – possibly the only truly “first class” trip Paul takes in his entire life. But we also note that it is the third watch of the night. That means two or three o'clock in the morning. Paul will be halfway to Caesarea by the time the assassins wake up the following day. And Caesarea is the strongest and best fortified Roman city in the region.

I am enthralled by this story. I am grateful that Paul's life was saved. I have much appreciation and respect for Paul's sister and nephew. But of course, I also wonder how long those fellows went without eating or drinking.