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God's Tests

By David Servant

SIXTEEN

Paul's Path

But when He who had set me apart, even from my mother's womb, and called me through His grace, was pleased to reveal His Son in me, that I might preach Him among the Gentiles... (Gal. 1:15-16a).

Paul, first known as Saul of Tarsus, was another person of divine destiny, just like you. His specific calling was to be an apostle to the Gentiles.

You may not be called to plant churches, but as a member of Christ's body, you are called to do something. Therefore, like Paul, you can say that you were "set apart from your mother's womb" for a divine purpose. The circumstances of your life have not occurred by pure chance.

I'm afraid that too many Christians have a sub-biblical view of their existence. If you ask them, "Why are you here?" they respond with something like, "When two people are married, they usually have babies. I was one of those babies born into the world." They see themselves as a number—another product off the assembly line. Such a sub-biblical view leads to a sub-biblical life. What a tragedy it is for any Christian to live a mundane, purposeless life, ignorant of the special purpose for which he or she was created (and re-created).

The Unsaved Apostle Paul

Although Paul was set apart from his mother's womb to be an apostle to the Gentiles, when we are first introduced to him in Acts 7, do we find him fulfilling his calling, preaching to the Gentiles? Not exactly. Rather, we find him holding the coats of the folks who were stoning Stephen—the church's first martyr. At that point, Paul was a very zealous, yet misdirected young Pharisee and a persecutor of the church. He wasn't exactly fulfilling his divine destiny. God, however, knew how to get his attention and enlighten him as well. After being struck down by a blinding light on the road to Damascus, Paul wisely decided to cooperate with God from then on (see Acts 9:1-7).

Shortly thereafter, God began to reveal to Paul the destiny that he was to fulfill. When Ananias, whom God commissioned to go and lay his hands on Paul, understandably

protested that Paul was not the kind of person whom Christians wanted to be near, God said to him:

Go, for he is a chosen instrument of Mine, to bear My name before the Gentiles and kings and the sons of Israel; for I will show him how much he must suffer for My name's sake"(Acts. 9:15-16).

There you have Paul's divine destiny in a nutshell. He was destined to bear Jesus' name before (primarily) the Gentiles, (secondarily) kings, and (thirdly) the Jews. As a result, he would suffer a great deal for the cause of Christ. If you know his story, you know that exactly what God said is what came to pass.

Instant Apostles?

How long did it take Paul to fulfill his divine destiny? *The rest of his life*. He began his spiritual journey as a believer who shared with others what God had done for him (see Acts 9:19-22), which is the starting place for all of us.

Even as a young Christian, Paul did a very convincing job proving from Scripture that Jesus was the Messiah. He was so effective, in fact, that some Jews in Damascus schemed to ambush and kill him. Upon discovery of their plot, Paul's converts lowered him over the city wall of Damascus at night, and he escaped. I suspect that episode helped prepare Paul for the larger trials he would later face.

According to Paul's own narrative, after escaping from Damascus he left for Arabia, and later returned to Damascus. Three years after his conversion, he traveled to Jerusalem and stayed with Peter for about two weeks. Following another threat on his life, he traveled to Syria and Cilicia (see Gal. 1:15-21; Acts 9:28-30; 22:17-18). Fourteen years later, he went to Jerusalem again (see Gal. 2:1; that visit was either the one recorded in Acts 11:29-30 or 15:2).

Paul continued preaching all this time, and, according to Acts 13:1, sometime during those initial years he was called to the ministry of a prophet and a teacher. Then, during a prayer meeting in Antioch, he was directed by the Lord to begin his apostolic ministry (see Acts 13:1-2; 14:14).

How much time passed from Paul's conversion until he entered into his apostolic ministry? Scholars are divided on the answer because the scriptural chronology is somewhat unclear, but as I see it, the absolute minimum time would be eleven years. It could have been possibly fourteen, or more. Paul was promoted as he was found faithful, which is true of anyone else who works for God.

Paul later wrote to Timothy:

I thank Christ Jesus our Lord, who has strengthened me, *because He considered me faithful*, putting me into service (1 Tim. 1:12, emphasis added).

In order for a person to be found faithful, he *must* of necessity be tested. Accordingly, Paul also wrote to the Thessalonians:

For our exhortation does not come from deceit or uncleanness, nor was it in guile. But as we have been approved by God to be entrusted with the gospel, even so we speak, not as pleasing men, but God who *tests* our hearts (1 Thes. 2:3-4, NKJV, emphasis added).

Notice Paul said that God had tested his heart, he had been approved, and he therefore had been entrusted with the gospel. You can be certain that Paul was tested in the same manner that Israel, Joseph, David, and Jesus' twelve disciples were tested. *He was tested in trials and temptations.*

God's Refining Pot

Solomon wrote in Proverbs 17:3: "The refining pot is for silver and the furnace for gold, but the Lord tests hearts."

What is the similarity between refining silver and gold and the Lord testing hearts? When silver and gold are refined, they are heated up until the impurities rise to the surface. Then the dross is scraped off, leaving behind purer metal.

It is in the fire that the pureness of gold and silver are determined, and the same is true for us. If you want to know how much faith a person has, put him in a place of difficulty. If you want to know how much love a person has, put him in a place where people hate him. If you want to know how much patience a person has, put him in a place where he will be tempted to be impatient. If you want to know how devoted a person's heart is to God, watch him when he is tempted to sin. If we understood this, we would realize that we're being tested all the time.

Let us ask ourselves, "When the impurities in me rise to the surface during those times in the furnace, do I recognize them and scrape them off, or do those impurities just settle back into me when things cool down, leaving behind the same vessel?"

I once heard an elderly pastor relate some of his experiences in the first church he pastored. After every service, a certain carping old lady would criticize his sermon as she shook his hand in the back of the church. "You were dangling your particples today, pastor," she would say, and so on.

That elderly pastor said that he constantly had two prayer requests that he made to the Lord each day: (1) "Lord, please make me more like Jesus" and (2) "Please remove that obnoxious lady from my church!" (Most pastors can relate.)

One day the Lord spoke to him after he reiterated those requests and said, *I'm answering your first prayer by not answering your second prayer. I'm using that lady to help you become more like Jesus.* Furthermore the Lord said to him, *I've trained several young pastors through that lady.*

Back to the Apostle Paul

It took Paul as many as fourteen years from the time his divine destiny was revealed to him until the time he was commissioned as an apostle—the very thing that God had destined for him even before he was born. Isn't it interesting that Joseph and David (whom we considered in previous chapters) also experienced approximately the same time span between revelation of their calling and the beginning of the fulfillment? Like them, Paul first had to be found faithful, just as he said in his first letter to the Corinthians:

Let a man regard us in this manner, as stewards of the mysteries of God. In this case, moreover, it is required of stewards that one be found trustworthy (1 Cor. 4:1-2).

If I had a million dollars, and you were my steward, I wouldn't entrust all of my money to you. I might first entrust you with one hundred dollars to see how you handled it. If you invested it wisely and earned me a profit, I'd be inclined to entrust you with more—perhaps five hundred dollars. If you brought me a good return on that, I'd entrust you with more.

Still, it would be a few years before I'd entrust you with all my money! God, of course, is at least that wise. And He'll similarly test us to see if we can be trusted.

As Paul was found faithful, God entrusted him with more and more responsibility and gifting. Many years after he entered into his apostolic calling, God anointed Paul to an even greater degree:

And God was performing *extraordinary* miracles by the hands of Paul, so that handkerchiefs or aprons were carried from his body to the sick, and the diseases left them and the evil spirits went out (Acts. 19:11-12, emphasis added).

How many people do you know whom God is supernaturally using to that degree? I'm not claiming that God wills that all of His children be used to the same degree as the apostle Paul. I am persuaded, however, that there are *some* of God's children who are called to be supernatural church planters, and it *is* their divine destiny to be used like Paul—if they will remain faithful and pass the tests that come their way.

The Final Years of Paul's Ministry

Up until the 24th chapter of Acts, Paul had not yet been given the opportunity to “testify before kings” as God had revealed to Ananias a few days after Paul's conversion. Beginning in Acts 19, however, Paul began to take some Spirit-led steps that eventually opened up an audience for him before a number of kings, and ultimately even to Nero himself. As Roman Emperor, Nero would have been considered as high as anyone could go.

After Paul had met with much success preaching in the city of Ephesus, the record of the book of Acts tells us:

Now after these things were finished, Paul purposed in the spirit to go to Jerusalem after he had passed through Macedonia and Achaia, saying, “After I have been there, I must also see Rome” (Acts 19:21).

Notice that Paul “purposed in the spirit,” meaning that he knew in his spirit that God was leading him to travel through Macedonia and Achaia, then to Jerusalem and ultimately on to Rome. And that is the course he obediently followed.

On his way to Jerusalem, after spending several months in Macedonia and Achaia, Paul stopped near Ephesus and delivered his farewell sermon to the pastors there:

And now, behold, *bound in spirit*, I am on my way to Jerusalem, not knowing what will happen to me there, except that the Holy Spirit solemnly testifies to me in every city, saying that bonds and afflictions await me. But I do not consider my life of any account as dear to myself, *in order that I may finish my course, and the ministry which I received from the Lord Jesus*, to testify solemnly of the gospel of the grace of God (Acts. 20:22-24, emphasis added).

Notice Paul declared that he was “bound in spirit.” That means the Holy Spirit through his own spirit was compelling him to go to Jerusalem. He had an inward conviction, which is how God leads all of His children. He also said that he really didn't know what would happen to him when he arrived there, but that in every city in which he stopped as he traveled toward Jerusalem, the Holy Spirit was foretelling him that bonds and afflictions awaited him there.

We have a perfect example of exactly what Paul was talking about in Acts 21. When his ship landed at Tyre, he stayed with the disciples for seven days. The Bible says that those disciples “kept telling Paul through the Spirit not to set foot in Jerusalem” (Acts 21:4).

Should we assume that the Holy Spirit was trying to warn Paul not to go to Jerusalem? No, not if we read that verse in context of all the other relevant verses in Acts. The Holy Spirit was leading Paul to go to Jerusalem, but the disciples in Tyre sensed by the Holy Spirit that when Paul arrived in Jerusalem that “bonds and afflictions” awaited him there. From a natural standpoint, however, they didn’t want their beloved Paul to suffer. *William’s* translation says it this way: “Because of impressions made by the Spirit they kept warning Paul...”

Again, that is a perfect example of what Paul meant when he said that in every city the Holy Spirit testified that bonds and afflictions awaited him in Jerusalem. Christians who are sensitive to the Holy Spirit sometimes receive certain revelations, but they then add their own interpretations to these revelations, just like the believers of Tyre did.

Paul also stopped in at Philip the evangelist’s house in the port of Caesarea. While he was there, a well-respected prophet named Agabus came down from Judea:

And coming to us, he took Paul’s belt and bound his own feet and hands, and said, “This is what the Holy Spirit says: ‘In this way the Jews in Jerusalem will bind the man who owns this belt and deliver him into the hands of the Gentiles’” (Acts 21:11).

Once again the Holy Spirit was testifying that bonds and afflictions awaited Paul in Jerusalem. Notice that Agabus did not say, “Therefore, Paul, the Lord says that you are not to go to Jerusalem.” No, the Holy Spirit was only confirming to Paul one more time what he had perceived in his spirit months before.

Of course, when everyone in Philip’s house heard what Agabus predicted, they begged Paul not to go to Jerusalem. Paul responded: “What are you doing, weeping and breaking my heart? For I am ready not only to be bound, but even to die at Jerusalem for the name of the Lord Jesus.”

Luke then adds his commentary, “And since he would not be persuaded, we fell silent, remarking, ‘The will of the Lord be done!’” (Acts 21:13-14).

Paul, of course, knew he wouldn’t die in Jerusalem because God had already told him he would go to Rome after he’d been to Jerusalem (as we have already read).

God was leading Paul to a place that would result in hardship, but He had a divine purpose. Paul’s divine destiny was to testify before kings. How could a person in Paul’s day get an audience with Felix, Festus, Agrippa, and Nero? Would he knock on the palace door and say to the guard, “I’m here to share the gospel with the king. Does he have an hour that he can spare?” Hardly. The only way one could have opportunity to share the gospel with the king was if God gave one the opportunity. That is exactly what God was going to do for Paul.

Unfortunately, some have a hard time accepting this. They think God would never lead us into a situation that would result in hardship. Unless God takes us first class, they are sure it isn’t God who is leading! We need to accept the fact that our own personal comfort is much less important than the need of the lost to hear the gospel. Furthermore, God can use adversity to perfect us. He obviously knew full well the suffering that Paul would endure; He knew it before Paul was born—but He still led him to go to Jerusalem.

Paul Arrives

As he had been warned, affliction awaited Paul in Jerusalem. A Jewish riot started several days after he arrived, and the rioters would have killed him except for the timely arrival of a Roman commander on the scene. No doubt Paul had peace through it all, having been so well-warned in advance.

A few nights later, while Paul was being held in Roman barracks, Jesus personally visited him and told him, “Take courage; for as you have solemnly witnessed to My cause at Jerusalem, so you must witness at Rome also” (Acts. 23:11).

Take note that Jesus did not say, “Paul, what are you doing here in Jerusalem? I tried to warn you not to come here! Now look at the trouble you’ve gotten yourself into!” No, Paul was in God’s will, and he *had* heard from God months ago when he felt impressed that he would go to Rome.

Now let’s think about this particular story for a moment. Jesus got into those Roman barracks where Paul was being held, and He also got out of those Roman barracks. No demon or devil could stop Him. Do you suppose Jesus could have released Paul from those barracks? Jesus had previously supernaturally freed Paul and others from various prison cells (see Acts 5:17-21, 12:1-11, 16:25-30). Yet Jesus didn’t free Paul this time. Why not? *Because that is where He wanted Paul.* Behind the scenes, Jesus was arranging for Paul to testify before a few kings—to fulfill his divine destiny.

This helps us understand why God spoke to Paul through such spectacular means, namely, through a prophet and also a visitation by Jesus. When God speaks to us through spectacular means, it is because He knows we’ll need the extra assurance of spectacular guidance to bring us through the hardships we’ll face.

Paul was held in Jerusalem for a short time and then was moved to Caesarea, where he was held for two years. During that time, however, he was given opportunity to witness of Christ before governor Felix and his successor, governor Festus. Finally, he proclaimed the gospel before King Agrippa and his wife Bernice, which resulted in his being sent to Rome at the expense of the Roman Empire to testify before Caesar.

Do you suppose that Paul sat around and sulked while he was under arrest in Jerusalem, Caesarea, and Rome? No, he made the most of his circumstances, fellowshipping with the Lord, sharing his faith with the other prisoners and penning letters we still read today. It was during that time in his ministry that Paul wrote:

Now I want you to know, brethren, that my circumstances have turned out for the greater progress of the gospel, so that my imprisonment in Christ has become well known throughout the whole praetorian guard and to everyone else, and that most of the brethren, trusting in the Lord because of my imprisonment, have far more courage to speak the word of God without fear (Phil. 1:12-14).

Now there’s a guy who believed that “all things work together for good”! (He should have, since he’s the one who originally coined the phrase.)

What about the suffering he had to endure? Paul had a wonderful (and absolutely proper) attitude about that:

For I consider that the sufferings of this present time are not worthy to be compared with the glory that is to be revealed to us.... For momentary, light affliction is *producing for us an eternal weight of glory far beyond all comparison* (Rom. 8:18; 2 Cor. 4:17, emphasis added).

Glory be! When we suffer for the sake of the gospel, it just means we will have all that much more reward in heaven! Jesus promised:

Blessed are you when men hate you, and ostracize you, and heap insults upon you, and spurn your name as evil, for the sake of the Son of Man. Be glad in that day, and leap for joy, for behold, *your reward is great in heaven* (Luke 6:22-23, emphasis added).

On to Rome

I'm assuming you know Paul's story. If you don't, I encourage you to read the last seven chapters of the book of Acts. Paul was put on a ship for Rome and perceived in his spirit that the ship was in danger unless it harbored immediately before the winter arrived. The ship's captain wouldn't listen to him, and his ship was soon caught in a violent storm. The crew jettisoned all the cargo and waited to see what fate would bring them.

Thankfully, at least one man on board knew that he was on the path of his divine destiny. So he stood before the rest to reassure them:

Men, you ought to have followed my advice and not to have set sail from Crete, and incurred this damage and loss. And yet now I urge you to keep up your courage, for there shall be no loss of life among you, but only of the ship. For this very night an angel of the God to whom I belong and whom I serve stood before me, saying, "Do not be afraid, Paul; you must stand before Caesar; and behold, God has granted you all those you are sailing with you." Therefore, keep up your courage, men, for I believe God, that it will turn out exactly as I have been told. But we must run aground on a certain island (Acts 27:21-26).

Paul boarded that ship as a prisoner, but by the end he was acting like the captain!

If God could save the lives of everyone on board that ship, do you suppose He could have stopped that storm? Of course He could have.

I know some will say He couldn't because Jesus gave His authority to the church. All right, let's say you are correct (which you aren't), and God couldn't have stopped the storm because He gave His authority to the church. But let me ask you: Why then didn't Paul use *his* authority and rebuke the wind and the waves? Or why didn't the angel tell him to rebuke the storm, rather than tell him that they were going to lose their ship and run aground on a certain island?

Is it possible that God didn't stop the storm or give Paul supernatural faith to rebuke it because there were some people on an island whom He wanted to hear the gospel? That is, incidentally, exactly what happened. Just as the angel had told Paul, their ship ran aground on a reef, was destroyed by the force of the waves, and all 276 people on board either swam or floated on the ship's planks to the shores of the island of Malta.

If you look at a map of the Mediterranean Sea, you'll see that from a natural standpoint, there is about a one-in-fifty chance of a west-blown ship landing on Malta. (One more proof that God is sovereign over the wind.)

Once ashore, Paul was bitten by a deadly snake while gathering firewood, but he miraculously suffered no ill-effects. He didn't have to worry about dying because God had promised him that he would see Rome. The result was that the people of Malta thought Paul was a god, which gave him an opportunity to pray for the ailing father of the island's chief, who was consequently healed by the Lord.

The end result was that all the sick people on Malta came to Paul requesting that he pray for them, and they too were healed. Although the Bible doesn't give us all the details, there is little doubt that quite a few native Maltese, as well as many of Paul's sailing partners, came to know Jesus as their Lord. Once again, Paul could say that his "circumstances had turned out for the greater progress of the gospel" (Phil. 1:12), even though his circumstances (the shipwreck and the snakebite) could certainly have been viewed as tragic. Yet God had caused "all things to work together for good."

I'm persuaded that God will cause all things, even bad things, to work together for good in our lives as well if we'll cooperate with His plan and trust Him. We must, however, look beyond the circumstances, the adversity, the devil, and selfish people—to God who is in sovereign control.

Destiny Fulfilled

Paul was one who fulfilled his divine destiny. A few years before his martyrdom, as we have already read, he declared during his farewell sermon to the Ephesian elders:

But I do not consider my life of any account as dear to myself, *in order that I may finish my course*, and the ministry which I received from the Lord Jesus (Acts. 20:24, emphasis added).

It seems that even then Paul realized his divine destiny included martyrdom. He wrote to the Philippians:

That I shall not be put to shame in anything, but that with all boldness, Christ shall even now, as always, be exalted in my body, *whether by life or by death* (Phil. 1:20, emphasis added).

Finally, while being held in Rome, Paul penned these words:

The time of my departure has come. I have fought the good fight, *I have finished the course*, I have kept the faith; in the future 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 (2 Tim. 4:6b-8, emphasis added).

Will you be able to say at the time of your departure from this earth that you have finished the course God planned for your life? Will you have realized your divine destiny? How will you answer the great Judge when He asks you on that day, "*Did you follow My plans for your life or your own?*"