

"Paul's Legacy: Patience"

Galatians 1:11-17

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Paul polarizes people. That's just the way that it is. It's been that way since the beginning of his ministry, and it's still that way today. And if you want to prove it to yourself, just bring up Paul's name in a conversation sometime, then watch people's faces. Some people will smile. Others will wince. Some people will smile. Others won't. That's just what happens when you mention the name of Paul of Tarsus, the last of the apostles chosen and called by Christ.

So this morning as we bring up Paul's name and start to talk about his legacy for a second week, let me ask you a question. And I promise you I won't try to read your expressions as I do. Here's the question. What word comes to your mind when you think of Paul? And whatever it is, I'm willing to make a guess. I don't think it's the word, "patient."

But that's the word I want to talk about this morning. And I want to try and show why I associate that word with Paul's life and legacy. Because the truth is patience is very much a part of Paul's legacy, and part of what I hope will be my legacy and yours too.

So let me admit as we start what you may already be asking yourself? Why is he talking about patience? The word doesn't even show up in the passage from Galatians that we read this morning. And you're right. But even though the word doesn't show up, the story Paul tells in the first chapter of Galatians is a story that has a lot to say about patience.

And the reason it does is right at the end of the story. For after Paul writes about his former life in Judaism, after he writes about the way his life was changed by a revelation from God, after he writes about the call Christ placed on him to preach the gospel and his first experience doing that in Damascus, Paul writes one small sentence, "I went away," he writes, "into Arabia."

It's kind of a puzzling statement. I mean stop and think about it with me for a minute. And imagine yourself in Paul's place. You're traveling to Damascus one day, on your way to arrest Christians there, when a bright light flashes in front of

you. A voice says to you, "I'm Jesus, the one you're persecuting. But rise, enter the city and you'll be told what you are to do."

And after you hear the voice, you become blind until a man named Ananias comes to you and prays with you and then something like scales fall off your eyes. You join the disciples of Christ in Damascus, share the story in the synagogues, until threats are made against you. Then late one night, the disciples lower you down over the city walls, and send you on your way ...

Where? For how long? To do what? Have you ever been in a place like that in your life?

It's a place called the desert, and it's a name that fits; physically, emotionally and spiritually. And most of us have been there at one time or another in our lives wondering how did I get here and where will I go. Many of us can remember a time in our lives when we asked those questions, can't we? And because we can, we can understand Paul. He was in the desert at this point in his life. And the desert's a difficult place to be.

It's a dry place. Dust blows in the wind. And the sun beats down, testing your strength and your stamina. And what you would most like to do is to find a quick way through the desert. But sometimes, sometimes there's no quick way. For the truth is, (and it's a hard truth), but sometimes the truth is God allows His people to wander in the desert.

Israel discovered that when they wandered through the desert 40 years. Jesus discovered that when he wandered through the desert 40 days. And Paul discovered that when God allowed him to wander the desert too. But he doesn't tell us how long he was there. He simply says, "I went away into Arabia."

John Ortberg writes about the desert. "The desert is the place," he says, "that you didn't want to go. It's dry, barren. Life's bleak there." But if you take God seriously, someday, someday you'll probably find yourself in the desert. "You'll know it when your heart aches ... when you're sleep doesn't refresh you ... when life doesn't seem worth the effort."

"Often," he says, "the journey into the desert is triggered by some event. A relationship shatters. A child rebels. You go through a financial reversal. But other times, the desert just rises up in front of you for no reason at all. And either way, you discover in the desert, that faith in God is hard to hold on to.

You pray, no response, no sense of nearness. You feel confused, frustrated. "But in the desert," John says, "all we have to cling to is our faith." Our faith that God is with us, that He is leading us. "But God's way is rarely the quick way. It's seldom the easy way. It's almost never the way we would have chosen. But it's always the best way."

Do you believe that? Because if you I suspect one of the reasons you do is because you're discovered part of the purpose why God sometimes allows His people to wander through the desert. It's because the desert is the place where we can discover the power of a patient trust, a patient trust in God.

David discovered that trust. He writes about it in Psalm 40. "I waited patiently for the Lord," he says, "and God inclined to me and heard my cry. He brought me up out of the pit of destruction, out of the miry clay, and set my feet upon a rock, making my footsteps firm." David discovered the power of a patient trust.

Paul discovered it too. "I've gone without sleep," he writes. "I've known hunger and thirst." "But for the sake of Christ," he says, "I've been and still am content, content with weaknesses, insults, hardships, persecutions ..." Content, Paul writes in a desert full of experiences like that. Amazing! But that's the power of a patient trust.

So have you experienced it yet for yourself? The power of a patient trust? Because the truth seems to be that God wants all His sons and daughters to discover it. And He's willing to let us wander through some difficult times, some desert times in our lives to help us find it.

Dr. Jonathan Haidt teaches psychology at the University of Virginia. And he has a hypothetical exercise he often uses in his class. "Imagine," he says, "that you have a child, and for five minutes you're given a script of what your child's life, what it will turn out to be like. And along with the script you're given an eraser. You can edit the script. You can take out whatever you want.

And in the script it says your child will have a learning disability in grade school. Reading will come easy for some kids, but it will be laborious for yours.

In the script it says that in high school, your child will make some really close friends; and one of them will die in a car wreck.

The script says after high school your child will make it into college, but while they're there, they'll suffer from bouts with depression.

The script says after graduation your child will get a job, then lose it, in an economic downturn.

The script says your child will find another job eventually, get married and try to start a family, but go through years trying and remain childless.

You get the script. It's your child's life and you get to make the edits. Now, what will you erase?

If you could wave a wand, if you could erase every failure and setback, every experience of suffering or pain in your child's life, are you sure you would? Would it be a good idea? Are you sure it would cause your child to grow up to be a healthier, stronger, better person?

Or is it possible," Dr. Haidt asks his class, "is it possible that in some way people actually need adversity, setbacks, maybe even something like trauma to reach the fullest level of emotional and moral development and growth?"

It's a good question isn't it? But let me put it another way. Is it possible, do you think? Could it be that to reach the fullest level of emotional, moral and spiritual development God sometimes leads His people into the desert? I believe, Paul would have thought the answer to that question was "yes." I believe that's why he wrote words like these to the church at Rome.

"Being justified by faith," he wrote, "we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ. And through him we've gained access by faith into the grace where we now stand. So we boast about our hope of glory. And we know it comes from God. But we also boast about the glory of our sufferings, because, we know that suffering produces patience, patience produces character, character produces hope, and hope doesn't disappoint us."

"We know," Paul wrote, because he did. "We know," he wrote to the church at Rome, because he knew they did too. "We know," he wrote that suffering produces patience, that part of the purpose of the desert is produce in us the kind of patient trust that will ultimately shape our character in a way and causes us to put our hope in God.

In his book, entitled, *A Sweet and Bitter Providence*, John Piper says, "The Christian life is not a straight line leading from one blessing to the next and then finally to heaven. The Christian life is a winding and troubled road. Switchback after switchback.

And the point of biblical stories like Joseph's story or Job's story or Esther's story, or Ruth's story or Paul's story is to help us feel in our bones (not just know in our heads) that God is with us in all these strange turns. God is not just showing up after trouble comes and cleaning it up for us. He's plotting the course and managing our troubles with far-reaching purposes for our good, and for the glory of Jesus Christ."

Tony Snow, who served as White House Press Secretary to former President George W. Bush, suffered with colon cancer before and during his time in the White House. But someone asked him once what lessons he had learned from his sufferings. And he replied, "Patience. And trust. We want lives of simple, predictable ease; smooth, even trails as far as the eye can see. But God likes to go off-road."

And He does. And when He goes off road, God doesn't mind going into the desert, or letting His people go with him. He led Israel there. He led Jesus there. He led Paul there. And the reason God doesn't mind taking us to the desert is because He knows that He can take us through it.

His strength is sufficient for us. He knows that. His power is made perfect in our weakness. God knows that. But He needs us to know it too, not just understand it, but know it deep in our bones.

So He takes us off-road sometimes. And in the desert God teaches us an incredible value, the incredible value of patient trust, trust in His leading even when it's not where we want to go, trust in His plan for the future, instead of the plan we had for ourselves. Paul learned to patiently trust God's future for him in the beginning of His walk with God, and that patient trust sustained him throughout the rest of his life and ministry.

And if we learn the lesson, we can find the same sustaining grace. So when you feel like God is leading you through a difficult time, when you feel Him leading you into a desert, a place you don't want to go, go with Him. And let God teach you the incredible value of a patient trust. Let's pray ...