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**Grace Fellowship Church, Port Jervis, New York**

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**God's Love in God's Discipline in Paul's Life**

**Acts 9:1-23**

**Prayer:** *Father, we just again thank you for your grace, we thank you for your goodness. We just thank you for the fact that we can gather here, open up your book and listen and learn and be taught by your Holy Spirit. Lord, and I just again pray for the presence of your Spirit without whom we are just wasting our time. And so Father, we pray that you would guide us, that you would direct us, that you would grow us and that again that this would be of permanent value. We pray in Jesus' name. Amen.*

Well, we have been doing a series and it's a series about God's perceived absence or presence. I called it "Now you see me, now you don't," because often times our experience with God is just that. God makes his presence known unmistakably and then he appears to disappear. And so far we've looked at a series of reasons why God might appear to disappear. We've looked at the issue of God's timing and his agenda, and this morning we're going to be looking at God's discipline as something that might make us think God is absent when he's told us he will never leave nor

forsake us. We looked at God's timing and we looked at the life of Abraham. We discovered that one of the reasons why God seems to disappear in our lives is because God's perception of time and ours is vastly different. And a great deal of our struggle to find God stems from our inability to see time itself from his perspective rather than from our Western way of thinking. Remember God made a promise to Abraham that he would have a son, and he fulfilled that promise some 25 years after he made it and he never apologized for being late because he wasn't. We have to understand that when it comes to God's timing, we have to adapt to his way and not the other way around. And God took Moses into the desert and then he went silent for 40 years but he was never absent. Every day of that 40 years went according to God's plan for Moses including the 40 years of silence. Joseph sat in a jail cell for two full years even though he was innocent of the crime of rape, and that, too, was part of God's plan. You see, we have the scripture and the scripture allows us to see these folks from the ten thousand foot level and so we get to see God working behind the scenes. Well, not so for Abraham, and not so for Joseph. You know, for years and for decades they experienced now you see me and now you don't. And at street level I could certainly understand each of them thinking maybe I've been abandoned by God when they were not. You see, we in the West are extraordinarily impatient people and it's very easy to interpret God's timing as God's absence as God's disappearance,

as God's abandoning us when even the quick look that we've been taking at the precious saints in scripture has shown us that that really is not the case.

And next we looked at the issue of God's agenda as a source of God's perceived absence. And we looked at that agenda in Joseph's life. And again, another source of our struggle with God's presence or absence is the fact that he has for each of us two very different agendas. God's two-fold plan for us is to grow the kingdom and to grow our faith and sometimes that agenda plays itself out in our lives in ways that are absolutely mystifying, I mean, God appears in our lives and then he appears to disappear. And that's not only how we grow our faith, that's how God grows the kingdom. You see, God never sat Joseph down and told him, "oh, I have great plans for you, Joseph." He never told him that his agenda was going to take him from the humble life of a shepherd boy to the very vice regency of Egypt so that he could develop a plan that would save God's people from starving. God never told Joseph that that agenda required him to be kidnapped and sold and falsely imprisoned and then brought before a king as an interpreter of dreams. I mean all of this was according to God's agenda for Joseph's life and for the advancement of the kingdom. And the one thing that we noted is that it all unfolded day by day with no daily briefing from God. And again for Joseph, a lot of that was

now you see me, now you don't. And what God was developing in Joseph was a faith that would enable him to survive the "now you don't" times by simply putting his trust in God. Well, this morning we're going to look at a third cause of God's apparent absence in our life as a means of addressing something that all of us are going through, are going to go through and none of us are going to enjoy. That's discipline. *Hebrews 12:11* says: *For the moment all discipline seems painful rather than pleasant, but later it yields the peaceful fruit of righteousness to those who have been trained by it.*

We're going to take a look at how God works out his discipline in the life of Paul. Paul's life allows us to see God's faith building in action when it comes to God's timing, when it comes to God's agenda and his discipline because Paul had one of the most extraordinary "now you see me" moments in all of scripture. We're going to just read that in *Acts 9:1-16*, it says this: *Then Saul, still breathing threats and murder against the disciples of the Lord, went to the high priest and asked letters from him to the synagogues of Damascus, so that if he found any who were of the Way, whether men or women, he might bring them bound to Jerusalem. As he journeyed he came near Damascus, and suddenly a light shone around him from heaven. Then he fell to the ground, and heard a voice saying to him, "Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting Me?" And*

he said, "Who are you, Lord?" Then the Lord said, "I am Jesus, whom you are persecuting. It is hard for you to kick against the goads." So he, trembling and astonished, said, "Lord, what do You want me to do?" Then the Lord said to him, "Arise and go into the city, and you will be told what you must do." And the men who journeyed with him stood speechless, hearing a voice but seeing no one. Then Saul arose from the ground, and when his eyes were opened he saw no one. But they led him by the hand and brought him into Damascus and he was three days without sight, and neither ate nor drank. Now there was a certain disciple at Damascus named Ananias; and to whom the Lord said in a vision, "Ananias." And he said, "Here I am, Lord." So the Lord said to him, "Arise and go to the street called Straight, and inquire at the house of Judas for one called Saul of Tarsus, for behold, he is praying."

It gives me goose bumps to think of God just giving street map directions to Ananias. He's trying to get him and Paul together and I'm sure it gave a lot more than goose bumps to Ananias, because for him it was like asking a Jewish person to seek out and bless Hitler. "Lord," Ananias answered, "I've heard from many people about this man, how much harm he has done to Your saints in Jerusalem. And he has authority here from the chief priests to arrest all who call on your name." But the Lord said to him, "Go! For this man is My chosen instrument to take My name to Gentiles,

*kings, and the Israelites. I will show him how much he must suffer for My name!"*

Well, I think we could all agree Paul has had this amazing "now you see me" experience and right off the bat God tells him what his agenda is going to be. He says, *"Go! For this man is My chosen instrument to take My name to Gentiles, kings, and Israelites."* And shortly after that we get a sense of God's timing in Paul's life. This is Acts 9:20, it says: *At once he began to preach in the synagogues that Jesus is the son of God. All those who heard him were astonished and asked, "Isn't he the man who raised havoc in Jerusalem among all those who call on this name? And hasn't he come here to take them as prisoners to the chief priests?" Yet Saul grew more and more powerful and baffled the Jews living in Damascus by proving that Jesus is the Christ. After many days had gone by, the Jews conspired to kill him.* Well, the text tells us only that after many days had gone by the Jews conspired to kill him, and so we need to find some other corroborative evidence, and we have that in Paul in the book of Galatians where he fills out what "many days" meant. He's describing this same incident. He's describing his rising through the ranks of Judaism and his confrontation with the living God and then he describes what took place immediately afterwards in Galatians 1:16. He says: *For I did not immediately consult with anyone; nor did I go up to*

*Jerusalem to those who were apostles before me, but I went away into Arabia, and returned again to Damascus. Then after three years I went up to Jerusalem to visit Cephas and remained with him 15 days.*

Now we don't get much in the way of details but we do know that God took Paul into the desert of Arabia and that there were some three years spent in training. So we have an agenda. Paul is going to bring the gospel to the Gentiles and there's much that God intends to do in his life that's directed specifically towards that end. Secondly, we have God's timing. Paul disappears for three years after receiving the gospel, and finally what we're looking at this morning is God's discipline, and we get a hint of that when he says, "*I will show him how much he must suffer for My name!*" Now Paul suffered greatly but it was all part of God's discipline for his life. And no doubt many times he had a -- he had to wonder where is God in all of this? Have you ever wondered that? Have you ever had opportunity to have that kind of question asked of yourself? Have you ever had times, particularly when you are trying to be a blessing to someone or some cause where you find that everything is just going down the drain, your plans get turned upside down, your actions get second-guessed, your motives get misconstrued, perhaps you feel like saying, "God, I'm on your team. How come it doesn't feel like you're on mine?" Well, if anyone

could have felt that way, I suppose it should have been Paul. I mean, here he is constantly pouring his heart out for the kingdom and he's constantly getting kicked in the teeth. Paul didn't realize it but this was just the beginning of things going south. It was going to get a lot worse than that. See, Paul's heart and his pride were going to get crushed. See, one thing you could never accuse Paul of was a lack of enthusiasm. Even when he was persecuting the church, he did so flat out, peddle to the metal, and he did so because he genuinely perceived that these new believers in Jesus were a threat to the religion that he had been raised in. Just like his fellow Pharisees, he had a zeal but it was not according to knowledge. And he confessed as much when he said in Acts 26:9-11 this, he said: *"I myself was convinced that I ought to do many things in opposing the name of Jesus of Nazareth. And I did so in Jerusalem. I not only locked up many of the saints in prison after receiving authority from the chief priests, but when they were put to death I cast my vote against them. And I punished them often in all the synagogues and tried to make them blaspheme, and in raging fury against them I persecuted them even to foreign cities."*

Well, that very same zeal that he now had for Christ and his gospel, it became the hallmark of Paul's approach from the day he came into the kingdom of Christ. But we quickly find out it was a



zeal that went nowhere. In fact things rapidly went from bad to worse after Paul returned to Damascus. Acts 9:23 says: *And when many days had passed, the Jews plotted to kill him, but their plot became known to Saul. They were watching the gates day and night in order to kill him, but his disciples took him by night and let him down through an opening in the wall, lowering him in a basket.* Now how's that for a classy exit? I mean, here's Paul going from Damascus to Jerusalem, and if anyone had to be fearful about heading to Jerusalem, it had to be Paul because the very last time he was there he was still burnishing his reputation as a fearful persecutor of Christ and the church. I mean Jerusalem is the place where Paul enthusiastically supported the martyrdom of Stephen for the very cause that he's now preaching for. I mean the three years that he spent in the desert training, the only thing that has grown in Jerusalem among Paul's Jewish contemporaries is the notion that Paul is now a full-blown traitor to Judaism and a sold-out follower of Jesus Christ. In fact years later in Acts 22 Paul describes for us the mindset that he encountered when he gets to Jerusalem. He says in Acts 22, he says: *"When I had returned to Jerusalem and was praying in the temple, I fell into a trance and saw him -- God Himself -- saying to me, 'Make haste and get out of Jerusalem quickly, because they will not accept your testimony about me.'"* God's telling Paul flee for your life. So here at this point Paul finds himself going from Damascus where his zeal had his

contemporaries plotting his death to Jerusalem, where his testimony made them equally murderous. And yet Paul has never lost his enthusiasm. It never seemed to occur to Paul that things seemed to go much better for him as a persecutor of Christ than as a follower. I mean as a persecutor, Paul had power, he had prestige, he had the privilege of popular opinion thoroughly on his side. And as a new found follower of Jesus, he found all of that just evaporating. It was leaving the only unreasoned hatred that natural man has for the gospel and this seething hatred that his fellow Jews had for this trader named Paul. Leaving Damascus he enters Jerusalem knowing that his only hope is this community of new believers that has sprung up that he now feels called to but he's in for yet another surprise. *Acts 9:26* says: *And when he had come to Jerusalem, he attempted to join the disciples. And they were all afraid of him, for they did not believe that he was a disciple.* So Paul is now literally suspended in midair. I mean he has clearly cut all of his ties with the past that is now plotting to kill him, and the future that God has called him to is the church, the future that pulled him into the desert for three years of training and after cutting all of his ties with the past, Paul found a future that wanted nothing to do with him. *"And they were all afraid of him, for they did not believe that he was a disciple."*

Now you might think is this any way to treat someone who is "dearly beloved of God?" I mean this is an incredibly important question. I mean, how you answer this question is going to define how you live out your Christian life particularly when it comes to God's discipline. There are three different responses that most people have to circumstances like Paul found himself in. Two of them are disastrous; one of them's the truth. Now the two disastrous responses are variations on the theme that responds to discipline by thinking, number one, God is punishing me for something I did in the past or, number two, God is punishing me for something I've done wrong right now. Let me get something straight right off the bat about the understanding of God's discipline. We think of discipline as punishment. We think of it as something to fear. We do something bad, we've made someone mad, and we get punished as a means of easing the anger of the punisher. Well, for many of us that's all we understand about the concept of discipline. But God sees it very differently. *1 John 4:18 says: There is no fear in love, but perfect love casts out fear. For fear has to do with punishment, and whoever fears has not been perfected in love.* We have no fear because Jesus Christ was punished in my place. You have to understand that sin, your sin, my sin, has never, never been a surprise to God. 2,000 years ago when Jesus was hanging on the cross, every one of our sins came before him. He got to see all of our sins 2,000 years in the future because he was paying for

them. So the sins that you commit on your 90th birthday, should you live that long, will never cause God to say, "Oh, my goodness, what's that?" God saw from the beginning the very worst you have to offer and he still chose to love you. Jesus took on flesh and he lived this perfect life and then he offered that life as a sacrifice for your sins and mine, and the punishment for that sin fell on him, not on us. By faith, I have made Jesus's perfect life my own before God and so he now sees me in Christ as perfect. And so the concept of God's discipline as punishment, well, that's a lie. That's a lie straight from the enemy. I mean, look at Paul, Paul had done some pretty bad stuff in his life, I mean, he had murdered people for the crime of proclaiming Christ. I mean he acknowledged his sin in *1 Timothy* when he said this, he said: *The saying is trustworthy and deserving of full acceptance, that Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners, of whom I am the foremost.* Paul saw himself as the number one sinner. But he never ascribed the struggles in his life as God punishing him for something that he had done before. See, Paul understood right from the beginning that he was beloved of God. I mean he understood it and he preached it. He said in *2 Thessalonians 2:13*: *But we ought always to give thanks to God for you, brothers beloved by the Lord, because God chose you as the firstfruits to be saved, through sanctification by the Spirit and belief in the truth.*

You know Paul also knew that God wasn't punishing him for mistakes he was making as a new believer because Paul understood the difference between punishment and discipline. Punishment is a means of exacting justice. Discipline is a means of shaping and molding our thoughts, our attitudes and our actions. It's what God does in the lives of people he loves. He said this in *Hebrews 12*, he said: *And have you forgotten the exhortation that addresses you as sons? "My son, do not regard lightly the discipline of the Lord, nor be weary when reproved by him. For the Lord disciplines the one he loves, and chastises every son whom he receives." It is for discipline that you have to endure. God is treating you as sons. For what son is there whom his father does not discipline?*

See there's a huge difference between being beloved of God simply because God has chosen to fix his love on us and working desperately to somehow make ourselves loveable enough for God. Can I tell you something? You can't do that. You cannot make yourself loveable enough for God. God is perfect, we are not. All of us fall short of God's glory. And our attempts to earn God's love will always fall short, not only will they fall short but they will affect us with pride. I mean God loves me because why? Well, why shouldn't he? I mean, if you're a child of God it's because God has first poured out his love on you for nothing you have ever done to deserve it. Every one of us was morally bankrupt when God

rescued us. He says in *Romans 5:6*: *For while we were still helpless, at the appointed moment, Christ died for the ungodly. That's us. For rarely will someone die for a just person -- though for a good person perhaps someone might even dare to die. But God proves his own love for us in that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us!*

See, the love of God is something that God himself shows us and he tells us, he shows us in the cross and he tells us in his word. He shows us and he tells us, then why does so much of what happens in my life that's a negative feel like punishment? Well, allow me to answer that question with an illustration. Years ago my grandson Gideon started to develop a bowed leg. Elisa took him to the pediatric orthopedist, said he needed a brace in order to straighten his leg out. So for eight months, many of you saw him running around here, he had a brace that went from his foot to his hip. See, his leg was bending and growing in the wrong direction and the brace was designed to bend it in the opposite direction, and it worked. We are, all of us, born bent in the wrong direction. We are bent that way by sin. And even when we are born again, we still have our flesh to contend with. See, as God's children, we now represent the King of kings and the Lord of lords, but here's the problem. We don't think like he does, we don't value what he values, and we don't act like he acts because we're

bent in the wrong direction. God's discipline is a brace designed to bend us in the right direction. I mean Elisa and Alex would never even think of punishing Gideon because his leg wasn't right. I mean the brace was simply necessary to bend the leg back but it was also at times painful. Again, *no discipline seems enjoyable at the time, but painful. Later on, however, it yields the fruit of peace and righteousness to those who have been trained by it.* And to Gideon, you remember having to wear that brace every single day, particularly if you don't understand the medicine behind it, it must have certainly felt like punishment. Discipline is a means of shaping and molding thoughts, attitudes, and actions, and if you are a child of the King, there's good news and there is bad news. It's that you are going to receive the King's discipline and sometimes it's going to feel like "now you see me, now you don't." I mean the apostle Paul went through a discipline that was by all standards brutal. But he never once fell prey to thinking that God was punishing him or abandoning him for sins past or present. And what he understood was that God was shaping him, disciplining him into the very image of his Son. And his Son the Lord Jesus Christ knew full well that changing our bend from earthward to heavenward often entails grief and sorrow and struggle and pain. Jesus himself said in *John 16:33: "In the world you will have tribulation. But take heart; I have overcome the world."* See, Paul understood exactly why he was disciplined as he was and he

said of the gospel that had been entrusted of him in *2 Corinthians 4*: *But we have this treasure in jars of clay, to show that the surpassing power belongs to God and not to us. We are afflicted in every way, but not crushed; perplexed, but not driven to despair; persecuted, but not forsaken; struck down, but not destroyed; always carrying in the body the death of Jesus, so that the life of Jesus may also be manifested in our bodies.*

R. Kent Hughes observes that the Christian life usually involves three phases: This is easy, this is hard, this is impossible. He's describing how discipline usually works. Phase one is the this is easy phase. Now I found that out as well. I found that out as a brand new Christian. I found out that God did amazing and miraculous things in my life, I mean, I would share the gospel with people and they would say, "Okay, where do I sign up?" They'd become Christians. I mean it seemed so ridiculously easy. I thought it was simply a matter of explaining the gospel clearly, then pointing people to what church they should go to. I found myself in situations and circumstances that just seemed to work out miraculously. I just concluded that I'd signed up for the winning team. This is a piece of cake. Remarkably easy. That was until very early on when I began to hit phase two which is: Hey, this is hard. I can even remember the incident that introduced me to phase two, and I've mentioned this before. 35 years ago my partner and I



were working in San Francisco, we were trying to get our fancy furniture into fancy furniture galleries. And there was one gallery in particular that was the premiere one in San Francisco. If you got your stuff accepted in there, it could lead to all kinds of commissions from wealthy people and great success. We had designed a number of pieces for this gallery and we got a phone call one day from the proprietor who wanted to talk to us about an important commission. And we got in there and he started to explain this very fancy piece of furniture that he wanted constructed which was made out of solid rosewood and the doors would be just this way, and the cabinet had to be shaped in this exact particular way, built to these very exacting dimensions and finally I asked the guy, I says, "What is this thing?" He looked at me and he said, "It's going to be a Buddhist prayer altar." Well, I'm sure I turned gray on the spot, but I didn't know what to say and I didn't say a word till we got out of the gallery whereupon I had a very spirited discussion with my partner who was a Christian about whether or not this was an opportunity for success or a spiritual disaster just waiting to happen. A long story short, I spent the night just agonizing over it. The next day I called the gallery owner and explained to him that I was a follower of Jesus Christ and that inasmuch as I appreciated his offer a great deal, I just could not in good conscience take the commission. Now the gallery owner was a Jewish man, and so I

figured there would be some common ground there and I pointed out to him the trouble Aaron had in the Old Testament when he was called upon to make a golden calf out of earrings, but he was strangely unmoved by the story. Any time somebody responds to this by somebody putting up his hands, saying, "Let me get this straight," you know it's not going to be good. So we lost the commission and the considerable good will of that gallery, but I had already had this figured out. See, in my mind, I said, "God, I just did this great thing. I stuck up for you, and so now you're going to help me out, right? I mean, this is the way this works, one hand washes the other, isn't that the truth? Well, what followed immediately thereafter was that our business took a nose dive. And from the standpoint of our career as San Francisco furniture makers, we had blown it. I mean, I didn't realize then that God was just beginning to introduce me to phase two, hey, this is hard. Next thing on I caught this exotic lung disease, started hacking my lungs up. I was drinking a bottle of cough syrup a day. And so I went to the doctor's. Janice worked as a nurse and I went to the doctor's, she had some nurses who were friends, they took some x-rays, the guy came out and said this is very serious, we think you have Hodgkin's disease. So I had to go to the hospital, I had to have an operation. They did a biopsy on my lung and it turns out that I had Boeck's sarcoidosis which is a very serious disease, it's what killed the comedian Bernie Mac, it killed Reggie

White, the football great. And my wife was pregnant with my son Josh and I was convinced I was going to die. And so I was thoroughly into phase two, which is, "Hey, this is hard." But my whole church began to pray in earnest for my healing. And guess what? The disease miraculously disappeared. So after a few more years in San Francisco, we wound up going back to the east coast to a place called Port Jervis. It didn't even have a port. There's no water. So there I discovered phase three: "This isn't easy, this isn't hard, this is impossible." And time and time again I found God placing myself and my family in circumstances and situations that went beyond fixable at least by human standards. And the times between "now you see me and now you don't" grew longer and longer. And I do confess there were times when I did think that God had to be punishing me for sins I'd committed in the past or in the present. But with every impossible situation there came a solution and it had God's fingerprints all over it. After 44 years of living this Christian life, I'm thinking I'm just starting to get a glimpse of what God was doing in the discipline he was expressing in my life. And if I were to sum up everything that I believe God was trying to tell me through all of those years of discipline it was simply this: That he's trustworthy. That you can place your trust in him. What God wants from me, what he wants from you is a faith that is willing to trust him no matter what life throws at us.

"Life is easy" is a focus on me and my new life in Christ. "Life is hard" is a focus on circumstance and how God can lead us through it but "life is impossible" is a focus on God himself and his all absolute sufficiency. And most discipline is designed to develop in us the ability to trust God when life is impossible. Listen to how Paul describes this in *Romans 5:3-5*. He describes the process of discipline by saying: *"More than that, we rejoice in our sufferings, knowing that suffering produces endurance, and endurance produces character, and character produces hope, and hope does not put us to shame, because God's love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit who has been given to us."* This is Paul himself describing a progression and discipline that always begins with difficulty. He says suffering starts the process and it ends in God's love being poured into our hearts.

Well, let me flesh this out by bringing us back to Paul's suffering. Let me just take us back to Acts where Paul is now stuck between this rock and a hard place. If you remember, the Jews hate him, the new believers fear him, and into this breach steps Barnabus known as the son of encouragement. Let me just rehash the plot for you. This is *Acts 9:23*, it says: *When many days had passed, the Jews plotted to kill him, but their plot became known to Saul. They were watching the gates day and night in order to kill him, but his disciples took him by night and let*

him down through an opening in the wall, lowering him in a basket. And when he had come to Jerusalem, he attempted to join the disciples. And they were all afraid of him, for they did not believe that he was a disciple. But Barnabus took him and brought him to the apostles and declared to them how on the road he had seen the Lord, who spoke to him, and how at Damascus he had preached boldly in the name of Jesus. So Barnabus vouches for Paul's character. But look what happens next. See, we all expect at last for things to turn a corner with Barnabus's endorsement, Paul begins at last his fruitful faithful ministry. Not so. Paul went from being rejected by his Jewish contemporaries to being rejected by the new believers and now even after Barnabus's endorsement, Paul's ministry flounders. Verse 28 says: *So he went in and out among them at Jerusalem, preaching boldly in the name of the Lord. And he spoke and disputed against the Hellenists. But they were seeking to kill him. And when the brothers learned this, they brought him down to Caesarea and sent him off to Tarsus.*

Now I can just imagine what those words must have sounded like to Paul. Hey, brother Paul, this is just not working out. In spite of all of your training, in spite of all of our encouragement, the response to you is that people still want to kill you. You're going to have to go. I can see Paul thinking of God: "Now you see me, now you really don't." I mean I think that's what we all think

when life gets hard. But God, like he did with Abraham, like he did with Joseph, told him ahead of time that this was not going to be easy. He says: *But the Lord said to him, "This man is My chosen instrument to take My name to Gentiles, kings, and Israelites. I will show him how much he must suffer for My name!"* So we theorize, perhaps Paul needed tenderizing. You know, I've mentioned this before, I've met brilliant people, people who could be widely used by the Lord but people who need, in my opinion, tenderizing. Have you ever seen those real big hammers that butchers use to tenderize meat? You get my drift. I mean God's tenderizing often involves getting pounded in one way or another until our flesh and our spirit respond like Paul's did. And even if it feels like punishment, it never is. Paul just disappears from the book of Acts and we don't hear about him for eight more years. And again, we're talking about timing and agenda and discipline. This is God's timing at work.

You know, the book of Acts now shifts its focus from Paul to Peter, and we don't hear from Paul again until chapter 11 but guess who finds him? This is Acts 11. It says: *So Barnabus went to Tarsus to look for Saul, and when he had found him, he brought him to Antioch. For a whole year they met with the church and taught a great many people. And in Antioch the disciples were first called Christians.* See, it was years later that Paul's ministry actually

took off. Now we fast forward from this point to Paul's days in Colossi. This is *Colossians 4*. Paul writes this: *Aristarchus my fellow prisoner greets you, and Mark the cousin of Barnabus (concerning whom you have received instructions -- if he comes to you, welcome him), and Jesus who is called Justus. These are the only men of the circumcision among my fellow workers for the kingdom of God, and they have been a comfort to me.* Once again you get this sense Paul is writing from prison, now it's "Now you see me, now you don't." What he's writing is that of all of his fellow Jews, only Aristarchus, Mark and Jesus Justice have been a comfort to him. Well, you know, maybe he was exaggerating, maybe he was exhausted or maybe he was simply forgetful of others. We don't know. But we know that Paul learned early on that the only genuine source of his comfort had to be the love of his God. And that is what sustained him until he got to Antioch. And we know from history and from God's word that Paul's return to the saints in Antioch marked what is arguably the most fruitful ministry a human being has ever had. Paul's life and his letters are the very core of the gospel that sustains us today. And I would love to say that everything was smooth sailing for Paul from Antioch onward but we know there were stonings and beatings and lashings and a shipwreck, and physical torment that he suffered from and that was all still ahead of him at this time. So was the jealousy and the backbiting that even his co-workers exhibited. But in the end, none of that

matters. Writing from prison the once proud Paul demonstrated that God's discipline had done its job. In *Philippians 1:12* he says: *I want you to know, brothers, that what has happened to me has really served to advance the gospel, so that it has become known throughout the whole imperial guard and to all the rest that my imprisonment is for Christ. And most of the brothers, having become confident in the Lord by my imprisonment, are much more bold to speak the word without fear. Some indeed preach Christ from envy and rivalry, but others from good will. The latter do it out of love, knowing that I am put here for the defense of the gospel. The former proclaim Christ out of rivalry, not sincerely, but thinking to afflict me in my imprisonment. What then? Only that in every way, whether in pretense or in truth, Christ is proclaimed, and in that I rejoice. Yes, and I will rejoice. You see, maybe after all Paul really did have only a few Jewish allies who were a comfort to him. It didn't matter. You see, he had Christ and that was enough. In 2 *Corinthians 12:10* Paul wrote: *For the sake of Christ, then, I am content with weaknesses, insults, hardships, persecutions, and calamities. For when I am weak, then I am strong.**

So how does Paul's experience of the love of God and the discipline of God's love translate to my life today? Well, the next time you are tempted to think of God's discipline as the heavenly equivalent



of an earthbound angry parent, the next time you think God is punishing you for sins past or present, consider our brother Paul and the discipline God placed him under. God bent Paul's life from earthward to heavenward and that discipline was extremely painful, but it was never done in spite of anger but in love and Paul fully understood that. It was Paul who said in *Ephesians 3:17*: *I pray that you, being rooted and firmly established in love, may be able to comprehend with all the saints what is the length and width and height and depth of God's love, and to know the Messiah's love that surpasses knowledge, so you may be filled with all the fullness of God.*

See, when you think about God's discipline, just consider the bent all of us have toward earth and the brace of discipline that God lovingly wraps us all in that is designed to change our bend from earthward to heavenward. My grandson Gideon never, ever grew fond of his brace, and we will never grow fond of God's discipline because it is painful. No discipline seems enjoyable at the time, but painful. But understand that unlike that of our earthly parents, God's discipline is never, never given in anger. I'd never have the gall to put myself even remotely in league with Paul but I think I understand what God's discipline has done in my life in the same way that Paul understood it. I mean, God's goal for us is to trust him so thoroughly that no matter what circumstances

befall us, we know in our heart of hearts that he can get us not around something but through it. If we fix our eyes on God and kingdom, then it doesn't matter if there are physical, psychological or spiritual hardships in front of us. We know even though we don't know what the future holds, we know who holds the future. I mean that's exactly what sustained Paul.

So your journey may be at the "now you see me" phase, or it may be at the "now you don't." We want to see it the way Paul saw it.

And after being trained by it, this is what he could say:

*Therefore we do not give up. Even though our outer person is being destroyed, our inner person is being renewed day by day. For our momentary light affliction is producing for us an absolutely incomparable eternal weight of glory. So we do not focus on what is seen, but on what is unseen. For what is seen is temporary, but what is unseen is eternal. Let's pray.*

*Father God, I just thank you for your discipline and I just want to pray for each and every person right now who is feeling under that discipline that they're being punished, that God is angry, that God is working his anger out by making their life miserable. Lord, may they understand that that is a lie from the very pit. God loves you, has not stopped loving you before you were born. By the time you reached your 90th birthday, by the time you're long gone,*

*there's never, never been a sin that's taken God by surprise in your life and yet he has chosen to pour his love out on you, if you know him as Lord and Savior. And so, Lord, I pray for each and every one of us that we would understand this discipline is really just a brace to re-bend us from earthward to heavenward. It's painful, but it's part of God's love and it's part of God's plan for your life. I pray we would understand that, I pray we would grow through it and I pray we would thank God for it, and I pray this in Jesus' name. Amen.*