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Now You See Me, Now You Don't - Paul's Story

Selected Scriptures

Prayer: *Father, I just want to again thank you for your grace, thank you for your goodness, thank you for gathering us together in this church, Lord, it's your gift to us and we praise you and thank you for it. We pray as we gather with the other gifts that you've given to us, your word, your Son. I just again pray for the presence of your Holy Spirit as we open up your word, that we would just continue to see what you have there for us and to again make it of permanent value. And we pray this in Jesus' name. Amen.*

Well as you probably know we've been doing a series about God's presence or his absence in our lives and I've entitled it "Now You See Me, Now You Don't." When you become a believer in Jesus Christ God begins a process known as "sanctification" in which every single thing that happens in your life begins to shape and mold you into the image of his Son, the Lord Jesus Christ. And that's why we can make the claim that *for those who love God all things work together for good, for those who are called according to his purpose.* And that process of sanctification oftentimes involves

God's presence and his apparent absence, and I say "apparent" because God actually never leaves us. God has made that clear. Paul said in *Romans 8:38*: *For I am sure that neither death nor life, nor angels nor rulers, nor things present nor things to come, nor powers, nor height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord.*

We may know in our heads that nothing can separate us from the love of God, but practically speaking we oftentimes feel like God is absent in our lives. And so for that reason we've been looking into the scripture at the lives of some of God's great saints to see how they too experience that same feeling to see how we might better process those feelings in our lives. And so far we've looked at "now you see me, now you don't" in the life of Abraham and in the life of Joseph. Now we're looking at the life of Paul. I think we can all agree that Paul had an amazing "now you see me" experience. He was literally knocked off his horse and blinded by Jesus Christ himself and almost immediately afterward God revealed his agenda for Paul along with his timing. And what we're focusing on this morning is something a little different. This is God's discipline. Right off the bat we find out that God tells us what his agenda is for Paul. In *Acts 9* he said: *But the Lord said to him, "Go, for he is a chosen instrument of mine to carry my name*

before the Gentiles and kings and the children of Israel. For I will show him how much he must suffer for the sake of my name."

And then next we get a sense of God's timing in Paul's life. After his miraculous conversion he does this 180 and begins preaching Christ. Again, something that was a profound shock considering Paul had been an active persecutor of Christians before that. And after a period of time the people around him, the Jews recognize that his salvation is real, that he's a brand new person in Christ, a new creature with no intent whatsoever of going back. And so they decide it's time to get rid of him. Acts 9 says: *After many days had gone by, the Jews conspired to kill him. And we certainly don't get much by way of the details but we know that God took Paul into the desert of Arabia and they spent some three years there training him. And again it's no surprise that God's timing would be the way it is, three full years.*

So we have the agenda, Paul's going to bring the gospel to the Gentiles; we have God's timing, Paul disappears for three years after receiving the gospel; and finally we're looking this morning at God's discipline in Paul's life. And we get a hint of that when God says, *"I will show him how much he must suffer for my name."* Well, Paul suffered greatly but it was all part of God's discipline for his life and we all know that no discipline is pleasant at the

moment. You see, God was about the business of reprogramming and redirecting Paul's entire outlook on life and that's never easy for anyone. There's no doubt that Paul had many, many opportunities to wonder where was God in all of this, and again that's the question that we asked the last time. It's a question I think all of us ponder. Have you ever had any time particularly when you're trying to be a blessing to someone or some cause and you find out that everything seems to be going down the drain? Your plans get turned upside down, your actions get second-guessed, your motives get misconstrued? Well if anyone could have felt that, it was certainly Paul. I mean he's constantly pouring his heart out for the kingdom and he's constantly getting kicked in the teeth. And so because of that it took a good while for Paul to learn some of the basic things about God's love for him. And I make the point that the same is true for us. We are constantly struggling with this idea of the love of God, I mean, we cannot make ourselves lovely enough for God because God's perfect and we're not. And our attempts to earn God's love will always fall short. Not only will they fall short, they can easily infect us with pride. I mean God loves me because who wouldn't? I mean if you're a child of God it's because God has first poured out his love on you for nothing that you've done to deserve it.

And there's a huge difference between being beloved of God simply

because God has chosen to fix his love on you and working desperately to somehow make yourself loveable enough for God. That never works. 1 John 4:19 puts it as simply as it can be put. It says: *"We love because he first loved us."* I mean every one of us was morally bankrupt when God decided to rescue us. Romans 5 says: *For while we were still helpless, at the appointed moment, Christ died for the ungodly. 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!* I think we understand that to a certain extent, I mean the love of God is something that God himself demonstrates in the life of Christ. It's something that he speaks of in his word, the Bible. And if God shows us his love in the cross and he tells us of his love in the word, then why does so much of God's discipline in my life feel like the opposite of love? Why does discipline feel like punishment? Well allow me to answer that question with an illustration, actually an old illustration. It has to do with Gideon. Is Gideon here? There he is. Okay. Spotlight on Gideon.

Years ago my grandson Gideon developed a bowed leg. Elisa took him to a pediatric orthopedist who said he had to have a brace to straighten out his leg and for eight months most of you saw Gideon running around here with a brace that basically went from his foot

to his hips. His leg was bending and growing in the wrong direction. The brace was designed to bend it in the opposite direction, and it worked. But you see we were all of us born bent in the wrong direction by sin. And even when we're born again we still have our flesh to contend with as it constantly tries to bend us toward the earth and away from the kingdom of God. And 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 the king of kings thinks, 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 to bend us in the right direction.

I mean Alex and Elisa would never even think of punishing Gideon because his foot wasn't growing right. I mean the brace was simply necessary to bring the leg back to where it was supposed to be but it was also painful. *Hebrews 12* says: *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.* I mean to Gideon having to wear this brace every day particularly when he might not understand the medicine behind it might certainly have felt like punishment, but it was anything but. You see, God's discipline is a means of shaping and molding thoughts and attitudes and actions and if you're a child of the King the good news and the bad news is that you're going to receive

the king's discipline and sometimes it's going to feel like punishment. Oftentimes it's going to feel like "now you see me, now you don't."

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 or abandoning him for sins past and present. And what he understood was that God was shaping him, disciplining him, disciplining him into the very image of his Son. And his son the Lord Jesus Christ knew full well that changing our bent from earthward to heavenward often entailed grief, sorrow, struggle and pain. Speaking of Jesus himself, this is what God says in *Hebrews 5:8*. He says: *Although he was a son, he learned obedience through what he suffered.* And if discipline through suffering was good enough for Jesus, it certainly was also good enough for Paul. I mean Paul understood exactly why he was disciplined as he was and he said of the gospel he had been entrusted with: *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 discipline in the Christian life usually involves three phases. First there is a "this is easy phase" that's followed by a "this is hard phase" which is followed by "this is impossible." He's describing how discipline usually works. Phase one is the "this is easy phase." And I found that to be true as well. As a brand new Christian, I found that God did amazing and miraculous things in my life. I shared the gospel with people and they just became Christians. I mean it seemed so ridiculously easy that I thought all it was was a matter of explaining the gospel clearly then pointing to what church they should go to. I mean I found myself in circumstances and situations that just seemed to work out miraculously well, and I just concluded that I was part of the winning team. This was going to be remarkably easy. That was until 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.

45 years ago my partner and I were working in San Francisco. We were intent in getting a reputation established as fine furniture makers. We had this super fancy gallery in downtown San Francisco that we had fortunately gotten ourselves into. We got some of the stuff accepted in the gallery and if this gallery represented you it would lead to all kinds of commissions to wealthy people, great deal of success. So we had designed a number

of pieces for this gallery and we got a phone call from the proprietor. He wanted us to come in and talk to him about a very important commission that he had. We got in there and he started to explain that he wanted this very fancy piece of furniture made out of solid rosewood, and he wanted the doors to be made just this way, he wanted the cabinet to be shaped this exact way and built according to these very exacting dimensions. And so finally in the course of our conversation I asked the guy, I said, "What is this thing?" He looked at me and he said, "It's a Buddhist prayer altar." I'm sure I just turned grey right there at that moment. I didn't say a word. I walked out of the gallery and my partner and I was a Christian, we had a very spirited discussion as to whether this was a great opportunity for success or a spiritual disaster just waiting to happen. Well, long story short the next day I called the gallery owner, I explained to him that I was a follower of Jesus Christ and that inasmuch as I thought that this was a great deal that I could not in good conscience build his cabinet. The gallery owner was a Jewish man. So I tried to point out to him, I said, you know, you remember the Old Testament, you remember Aaron, you remember the golden calf, remember all the trouble he got when he tried to do that? He was obviously unmoved by the story. I mean any time somebody puts his hands up and goes "Let me get this straight" you know it's not going in a good direction.

So we lost the commission, we lost considerable goodwill with the gallery, but I'd already had this figured out because I was still in the "this is easy phase." So in my mind I thought, well, God, I just did a great thing for you, I stuck up for you, so now of course you're going to stick up for me, right? I mean this is the way it works, one hand washes the other? I do a good thing for you, you do a good thing for me? That's not how it worked. Not even remotely. I mean what followed immediately afterwards our business took a nose dive and from standpoint of our career in San Francisco as furniture makers we were pretty much finished. I didn't realize that God was just beginning to introduce us into phase two which is "this is hard."

So next I caught an exotic lung disease that at first they were convinced was Hodgkin's disease. I was drinking bottles and bottles of cough syrup to try to control my cough with no luck. And so finally I went to the doctor, they did a lung biopsy and determined that I had Boecks sarcoidosis which is the same disease that killed Bernie Mac, I don't know if you remember that. It's a very bizarre disease. And my wife was pregnant with my first son Josh and I was completely convinced I was going to die. So that's why I'm into this second phase, hey this is hard. This is not as easy as I thought. And so my church back there, they were praying in earnest for my healing. The amazing thing is this disease,

which nobody knows where it comes from, nobody knows what why it stays, nobody knows why it leaves, it just mysteriously disappeared.

And so I spent a few more years in San Francisco, we wound up going back to the East Coast to a place called Port Jervis, wherever that is, and that's when I discovered phase three. Phase one is this is easy; phase two is this is hard; phase three, this is impossible. And time and again I found God placing myself and my family in circumstances and situations that were beyond fixable by any human standards. And the times between "now you see me, now you don't" got longer and longer and longer. And I confess there were times when I did think that God was punishing me for sins that I had committed either in the past or the present, but with every impossible situation there came a solution that had God's fingerprints all over it. Not that any of that was obvious at first. I mean, to be honest God's solutions only became obvious when I started looking backwards. And it was oftentimes impossible to see God's hands sitting there in the present or trying to look forward to the future. And so oftentimes I felt abandoned, I felt cast off, I felt that God had shut up the heavens and shut me out, but I was always wrong. And after 48 years of living the Christian life I'm thinking I'm just now starting to get a glimpse of what God was doing in the discipline he was expressing in my life. If I

was to sum up everything that I believe God was trying to tell me through all these years of that discipline, it was simply this, that he's trustworthy, that he's worthy of your trust. 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. I mean "life is easy" is a focus on me and my new life in Christ. "Life is hard" is a focus on circumstances and how God can lead through it, but "life is impossible" is a focus on God himself and his absolute sufficiency.

And most discipline is designed to develop in us an ability to trust God when life is impossible because that's when you need it. Listen to how Paul in *Romans 5:3* describes the process of discipline. He says: *"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, he's describing a progression in discipline and it always starts with difficulty. I mean suffering starts the process that ends with God's love being poured into our hearts.

So let me flesh this out by bringing us back to Paul's suffering in particular. Let me just take you back to Acts where the recently

converted Paul is now stuck between a rock and a hard place. I mean the Jews hate his guts, the new believers fear him and into the breach steps one Barnabas, the disciple known as "the son of encouragement." Let me just rehash the plot for you. This is from Acts 9. It says: *When many days had passed, the Jews plotted to kill him -- that's Paul -- but their plot became known to Saul -- that was Paul's name before he became Paul. 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 Barnabas 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 Barnabas, Barnabas, he vouches for Paul's character but just watch what happens next. I mean we all expect that at last things are going to turn a corner with Barnabas's encouragement, Paul's finally going to begin his fruitful ministry. Not so. Paul went from being rejected by his Jewish contemporaries to now being rejected by these new believers. And now even after Barnabas's endorsement Paul's ministry flounders and it flops. 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.

I was just trying to picture those words that were spoken to Paul and now he understood them. Brother Paul, it's just not working out. I mean all of our training and all of our encouragement and all of the time that you spent and yet the people's response to you is that they want to kill you. You need to leave. I could just picture Paul thinking of God's presence now you see me, now you really, really don't. This is what we all think when life gets really hard. But God unlike what he did with Abraham and Joseph, he actually told Paul ahead of time that this wasn't going to be easy. *But the Lord said, "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!"*

And so we wonder, okay, how much does he need? There's a part here where I -- another part of God's discipline that I refer to as Paul's tenderizing. I've mentioned it before. I've known a lot of brilliant people, people who could have been widely used by the Lord but people who needed, in my opinion, tenderizing. And if you've ever seen those big hammers that chefs 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.

So Paul just disappears. He disappears from the book of Acts and we don't hear from him for eight more years, what I would call tenderizing which is another part of God's discipline. And here we see God's timing again. The book of Acts now shifts its focus from Paul to Peter and we don't hear from Paul again until chapter 11 and guess who finds him? It says: *So Barnabas 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.* So once again for Paul "now you see me" is again God's order of the day but "now you don't" is not far behind. Fast forward to this point to Paul's in Colossi and God's agenda starts to reinsert itself looking once again like discipline. This is what Paul says in *Colossians 4*. He says: *Aristarchus my fellow prisoner greets you, and Mark the cousin of Barnabas (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.*

Well Paul's writing from prison now and once again it's "now you see me, now you don't" and he writes that all of his fellow Jews only Aristarchus, Mark, and Jesus Justice have been a comfort. We don't know, maybe he was exaggerating, maybe he was exhausted, maybe he was forgetful of others who actually were a help, we don't know, but what we do know is that God's discipline is working its magic because he describes the source of his comfort and it's now the love of God. That's what sustained him until he got to Antioch. *2 Corinthians 12*, 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.*

We know from history and from God's word that Paul's return to the saints at Antioch marked the start of what is actually the most fruitful ministry a human being's ever had. I mean Paul's life in his letters are the very core of the gospel that we have today. And I'd love to say that everything was now smooth sailing for Paul from Antioch onward but God for reasons known to him had Paul firmly in stage three of "this is easy, this is hard, this is impossible," for most of his life. I mean most of his life Paul spent in the "this is impossible" phase. And even now we know that the stonings, beatings, lashings, shipwreck, physical torment that he suffered from, that was all still ahead of him at this time.

And so was the jealousy and the backbiting that even his co-workers exhibited, but in the end none of that mattered. Writing from prison, the once proud Paul determined that God's discipline had done its job. This is what he wrote. He said: *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.* Well maybe after all Paul really did have all these few Jewish allies who were a comfort to him but he had Christ and that was more than enough for him.

And so we ask, how does Paul's experience of the love of God and the discipline of God's love translate into my life today? Well the next time that you are tempted to think of God's discipline as a 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 that God put him under. What did God do? God bent Paul's life from earthward to heavenward, and that discipline was extremely painful but it was never done in spite or anger but in love, and Paul fully understood that. It was Paul who said in *Ephesians 3*: *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, 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 of God's discipline, consider the bent that all of us have toward earth and then understand the embrace of discipline that God is wrapping all of us in his design to change our bent from earthward to heavenward. I mean my grandson Gideon never grew fond of his brace and we will never grow fond of God's discipline because it hurts. Again, *no discipline seems enjoyable at the time, but painful.* But understand, unlike that of our earthly parents God's discipline is never, never given in anger. I mean I'd never have the gall to put myself even remotely in the league with Paul but I think I understand that God's discipline, what it's done in my life in the same way that Paul understood it. You see God's goal for us in our life 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 it but through it. If we fix our eyes on God and kingdom, it doesn't matter if there are physical,

psychological or spiritual hardships in front of us, we know that even if we don't know what the future holds, we know who holds that future and that's exactly what sustained Paul. That's why 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.* You see, your journey with God 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 after being trained by it -- quote -- *"so that 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."* You see, Paul had this split screen vision of life itself. He always had one eye on the kingdom of heaven on earth with all of his struggles, all of his troubles, all of his trials but he also had the other eye on the kingdom of heaven in heaven with all of its glory and majesty. And it was that ability to be constantly aware of both kingdoms that gave Paul the power and grace to be so powerfully used of God as he was. I mean you may have heard the statement often said, "he's so heavenly minded he's no earthly good." And like many of those kind of statements it sounds true but it's not, at least practically speaking. I mean I've never met anyone who's ever fit into that category and I've

met lots of folks who are so earthly minded they're no heavenly good. I mean they also may say it takes one to know one because I've also been one as well.

C.S. Lewis in *Mere Christianity* summed up nicely what heavenly vision really is. He says: "A continual looking forward to the eternal world is not (as some modern people think) a form of escapism or wishful thinking, but one of the things a Christian is meant to do. It does not mean that we are to leave the present world as it is. If you read history you will find that the Christians who did most for the present world were just those who thought most of the next. The Apostles themselves, who set on foot the conversion of the Roman Empire, the great men who built up the Middle Ages, the English Evangelicals who abolished the Slave Trade, all left their mark on Earth, precisely because their minds were occupied with Heaven. It is since Christians have largely ceased to think of the other world that they have become so ineffective in this. Aim at Heaven and you will get earth 'thrown in': aim at earth and you will get neither."

So the question we need to be asking ourselves this morning is what is it that we are aiming at? You see, it didn't much matter how much Gideon would complain about the brace on his leg, I mean he could have fussed, he could have fumed, he could have bitterly

resented the limit to his freedom that it represented, but it wouldn't have mattered at all because his parents loved him too much to let his complaints change the course of their discipline for his leg. So too our reaction to the response of God's discipline. We all complain. We have a tendency to see it as "now you see me, now you don't," and God has the same tendency that Alex and Elisa had and that is to ignore the complaint knowing that in the end this is the best possible course. I mean I know I did lots of complaining in the past and some of it I'm still ashamed of because the passage of time has repeatedly shown me some aspect of God's love and care that I never even imagined at the time. And it may well be that some of the tears that God says he will wipe away from us in heaven will be over times that we spent complaining and vilifying God for things that we later learned that were absolutely loving and caring on his part when put in the context of the big scheme of things. One thing I know for a fact is that having the perspective of being older and seeing much of my life in the rearview mirror shows me that God has been incredibly faithful in spite of my ungratefulness. And it also shows me that God has an agenda, a time frame, and a discipline unique not just to Paul but to you and me and everyone else who gives their life to him.

Towards the end of his life, the apostle Paul was giving a description of his conversion to King Agrippa, and he added one

little detail to the story that had not been told before. He told King Agrippa that after he had been blinded by the light and knocked from his horse, Jesus spoke to him and said this: *"It is hard for you to kick against the goads."* And what he said may sound strange to us but it made perfect sense to his hearers because he was repeating a well-known proverb. You see when farmers were training a new ox to the plow, they frequently have to deal with the unhappiness of the animal at being restrained. And they did so by having a sharp pointed stick called a goad that they would aim toward the back of the animal's leg whenever it went to kick against the plow. So every time it kicked it felt a very sharp pain of the goad. This is Jesus and this is Jesus telling Paul something that all of us need to realize. God's already told us that no discipline is pleasant at the time. Now he's telling us that kicking back at it or him is only going to cause us more pain in the end because it is he who is ultimately in charge. And sometimes you feel the pain of the goad immediately and you have the blessing of discipline playing itself out then and there. Other times it takes years and years for the pain of the goad to finally reach the point where we realize that God's not willing to let go of us. But either way God says I will run the course of your life for your good and my glory. And so if you've spent years and years resisting and kicking, perhaps now it's time to realize who is ultimately behind the plow, who is ultimately in charge all

the time and who ultimately loves you enough to put up with your kicking and wise enough to make it hurt and surrender to his discipline knowing *for those who love God all things work together for good, for those who are called according to his purpose.* Let's pray.

Father, we all have the tendency to kick against the goad and we recognize that you are the one who has designed it, you are the one who has deployed it, you are the one who is bringing it into each of our lives for the purpose of bending us not from heaven to earth but from earth to heaven. I pray, Lord, that you would continue to deal with us because we are, all of us, bent in the wrong direction. Continue to apply your discipline, continue to apply your love to us in that way, I pray. Continue to give us the ability to see and sense your discipline not as punishment, not as something stemming from an angry heavenly Father but as something designed to increase our joy and bring you glory. And we pray this in Jesus' name. Amen.