

Paul – A Legal Case Study

Chapter 6

Witnesses

One of the most important things I can do in any case is track down the witnesses I need. These witnesses might have insight into the actual events at issue. They might be able to testify to the character of people involved. Witnesses can make or break a case.

Witnesses come with baggage. Some want to help, but don't always have the personal knowledge necessary. Some want to hurt rather than help, and their motives must be carefully examined for any influence it might have on their testimony. Some witnesses are hoping to get paid for their testimony. This is especially true if they are expert witnesses, giving their expertise in return for compensation.

Any case that goes to trial must be based on evidence, and while the evidence can be "things," documents, a gun, etc., most evidence is testimony from witnesses. Finding and "scrubbing" witnesses are critical tasks.

In this case, we have Paul himself as a witness. Paul can testify first-hand about what had happened to him, what events led to the fracas in the Temple, and how the events of the day unfolded. But what about beyond Paul? Whom else should we examine as witnesses?

Our witness pool is limited to those mentioned in the writings we have available today. I would love to speak to Paul's parents, for example, but we know nothing beyond the fact they were Roman citizens from Tarsus who were Pharisees and kept their Jewish lineage intact going back over a thousand years.

Even with the limited witness pool, however, we are not devoid of witnesses. We have plenty! We just need to examine them, see what biases they may have, and understand the story they have to tell. This helps us put our defense of Paul together.

Here is my best list of witnesses that could be critical to Paul's defense.

Ananias

Paul's events on the road to Damascus marked the turning point in his life. His encounter with Jesus brought him physical blindness, but spiritual enlightenment. The key witness, other than Paul, that helps us understand this is the Jewish Christian Ananias in Damascus.

Having been blinded, Paul was led into Damascus as instructed by Jesus during the encounter on the road. Paul was spending his time in Damascus praying and he had a vision of a man named Ananias coming to see him. Ananias came to Paul, and based on the events from Ananias's perspective, he would be an important witness.

Ananias is a good witness for several reasons. First, he knew Paul's reputation *before* Paul's life-change on the Damascus road. He would be able to testify to his personal concern about Paul coming to Damascus to arrest the believers there. In fact, Ananias was told by the Lord in a vision to find Paul and restore his sight through prayer. In reply Ananias pointed out,

Lord, I have heard from many about this man, how much evil he has done to your saints at Jerusalem. And here he has authority from the chief priests to bind all who call on your name (Acts 9:13-14).

The last thing Ananias thought he should do is restore the sight of one who was determined to find those who believed Jesus was Messiah and persecute them. Ananias thought it would be better to leave Paul blind!

God assured Ananias this was right and that Paul was a changed man. God further explained that Paul was God's chosen one to go before Gentiles and kings as well as Jews proclaiming the truth of the resurrected Jesus.

Ananias would be able to testify that he went to Paul, following the instructions of his vision, and prayed over Paul. Ananias gave Paul his first clear commission and called on Paul to be baptized and give affirmation of his commitment to Jesus as Messiah. As Ananias prayed over and spoke to Paul, he saw the scales fall from Paul's eyes as his sight was restored. Ananias could also testify that Paul was a changed man. Paul didn't arrest Ananias or anyone else. He didn't put the Christian Jews in chains as he was authorized to do. Instead he affiliated with them and immediately began proclaiming Jesus in the synagogues as the Son of God.

Even beyond affiliating with the Christian believers in Damascus, Paul went to the synagogues and found his old allies, those who were unbelieving Jews, and Paul reasoned with them, using the Old Testament Scriptures to prove that Jesus was the Messiah (Acts 9:22).

With every witness, I have to ask what ulterior motive might exist for their testimony. With Ananias, I can find very little. There is no economic motivation for Ananias to say anything less than the truth. What is more, Ananias had a reputation of credibility among the whole Jewish community, those who believed in Jesus and those who didn't. He was,

a devout man according to the law, well-spoken of by all the Jews (Acts 22:12).

Ananias would also be helpful as a witness to the fact that Paul's life-change was not for personal gain. Paul left Jerusalem headed to Damascus in full control. Paul had letters from the key authorities authorizing his efforts at stamping out and arresting those confessing Jesus as Messiah. But as a result of his life-change, Paul's life was turned upside down. As Ananias would testify, Paul moved from being the persecutor to being the persecuted. Paul's life was in danger because he confessed Jesus as Messiah. The Christians had to help Paul escape Damascus by lowering him over the city walls in a basket. Ananias would be able to attest that,

When many days had passed, the Jews plotted to kill him, but their plot became known to Saul [aka "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 (Acts 9:22-25).

Ananias would be an early witness to establish the veracity and facts of Paul's movement from a non-believer, to a confessor of Jesus as Messiah. He would also attest to Paul's calling as a believer as well as Paul's lack of personal gain from his commitment to Jesus.

Barnabas

Barnabas would be the next witness in the phases of Paul's life. After Paul was lowered by the basket from Damascus, Paul made the two-week trek back to Jerusalem. Luke explains what happened upon Paul's arrival,

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 (Acts 9:26-27).

It is an interesting phenomenon that sometimes one's purest intentions are misread by others. Paul experienced this. Paul left Damascus because he had worn out his welcome among the non-believing Jews, and with his life endangered, Paul returned to his new-found Christian fellowship in Jerusalem. The Christians, however, thought Paul was tricking them with a false claim of belief in order to infiltrate their ranks and bring the movement to a halt.

These facts would be important for Paul's testimony because they again would show the depths to which Paul's life choice had thrown him. Paul wasn't a Christian super-hero after he found faith. He was in danger from the non-believing Jews, and mistrusted by believing Jews. Paul went from the top of the food chain to being eaten by everyone. Barnabas could testify to that and also provide the critical testimony about how things began to turn around for Paul.

What kind of witness would Barnabas make? I suspect quite a good one. Barnabas was really named "Joseph." He was from the priestly caste, a Levite. Barnabas was not native to Jerusalem; he came from the island of Cyprus.

Barnabas was a giving person whose acts backed his beliefs. When the church was just getting its feet on the ground in Acts 4, we read that Barnabas owned a field, sold it, and gave the money to the apostles for use. This same passage (Acts 4:36-37) tells us that the apostles gave "Joseph" the nickname "Barnabas." Luke explained why.

Joseph, a Levite from Cyprus, whom the apostles called Barnabas (which means Son of Encouragement) (Acts 4:36).

Barnabas was a true believer who had years earlier put his "money where his mouth was" and lived up to his nickname as an encourager. Barnabas intervened with Paul and the church, learned Paul's story, and brought Paul into fellowship with the church. Barnabas could testify that Paul was authentic. After sticking his neck out and risking his reputation on Paul's authenticity, Paul made good on his faith. Through Barnabas, Paul was able to go "in and out among them at Jerusalem, preaching boldly in the name of the Lord" (Acts 9:28).

Barnabas's testimony would go beyond Paul's reception at the Jerusalem church. He could also testify that Paul was not in Jerusalem long before his preaching put his life at risk. No doubt Paul's former acquaintances were involved in going after Paul the very way Paul had persecuted the church the last time Paul was in Jerusalem. The church saw that Paul's life was in danger and sent Paul away from Jerusalem to his home in Tarsus (Acts 9:30).

At this point, it seems that Barnabas would have little to say about Paul for the next five years or so. In the interim before Barnabas and Paul re-establish contact, the Acts narrative explains that the church continued to spread even further out from Jerusalem.

Luke explains that the church had spread as far as Antioch, ironically because of the persecution that "arose over Stephen."¹ When word reached the apostles that the church

¹ Paul involved himself in the stoning of Stephen to stomp out the church. Paul's efforts – before leaving for Damascus—actually worked to further the church beyond Jerusalem!

was growing greatly, not only among Hebrew Jews, but also among Greek-speaking Jews, the church sent Barnabas to Antioch.

Barnabas did his work as “a good man, full of the Holy Spirit and of faith” (Acts 11:24) and even more were added to the church. Barnabas saw an opportunity and a need! Barnabas would be the key witness to establish Paul’s next major involvement with the church.

Barnabas went to Tarsus to look for Saul, and when he had found him, he brought him to Antioch.² For a whole year they met with the church and taught a great many people. And in Antioch, the disciples were first called Christians” (Acts 11:25-26).

By testifying to Paul’s work here, Barnabas could add that Paul was effective among the Greek Jews as well as the Hebrew-speaking Jews. This shows Paul actually fulfilling the commission that God informed Ananias (the first witness) awaited Paul.

He [Paul] is a chosen instrument of mine to carry my name before the Gentiles and kings and the children of Israel (Acts 9:15).

Barnabas is an important witness also because he was with Paul for an extended time. It wasn’t simply a short stint in Jerusalem followed by one year which came five years later in Antioch. This was the start of many co-workings between Paul and Barnabas. The two went to Jerusalem to help the church during a famine several years later (Acts 11:30). Once their visit was complete, they returned to Antioch taking with them John Mark, Barnabas’s cousin.

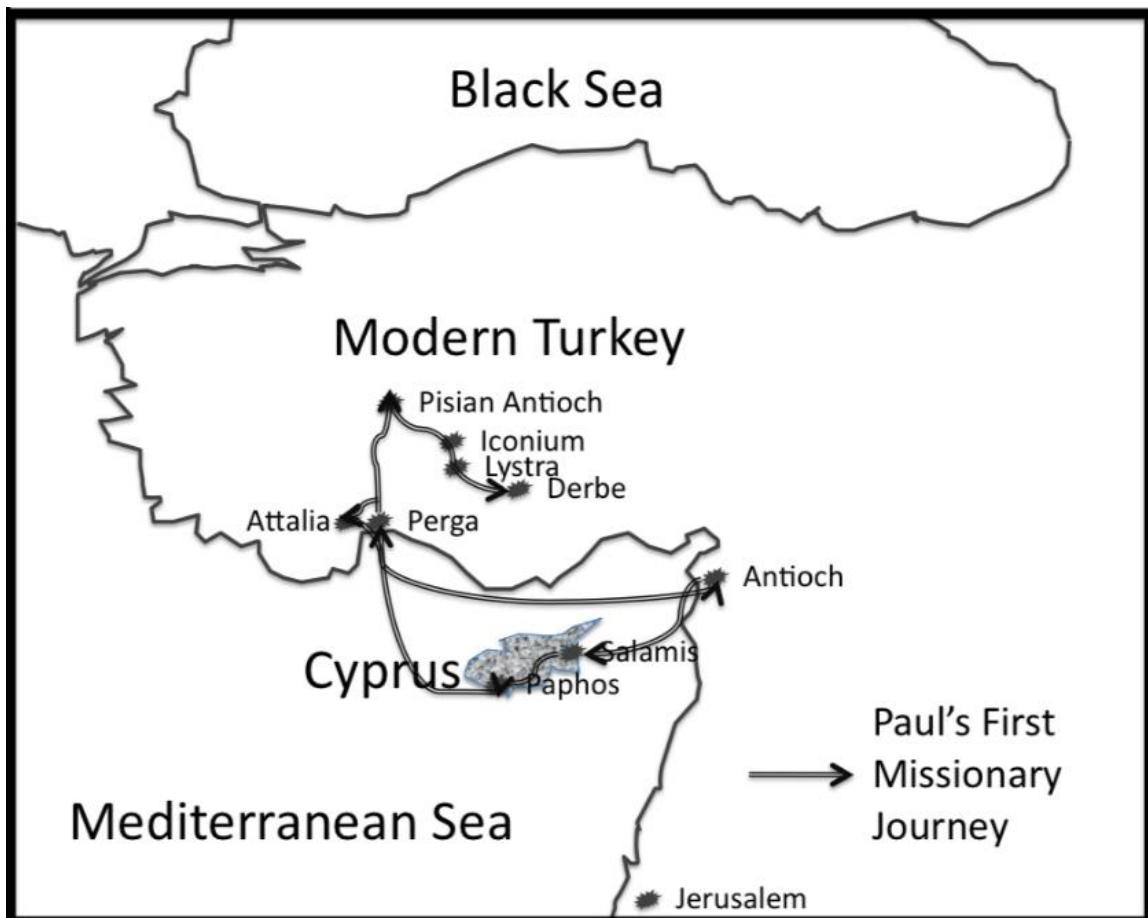
Called the “fourteen-year visit,” Paul wrote of this visit in his letter to the churches in Galatia (Gal. 2:1). This was important for Paul’s interactions with the apostles in Jerusalem. Paul and Barnabas got the blessings for their ministry and evangelism from the Jerusalem “pillars” (Gal. 2:9). These were the apostles James, John and Peter, each of whom could also testify as witnesses.

Paul and Barnabas joined efforts in what scholars often call “Paul’s First Missionary Journey.” Here Barnabas would become a very important witness. He could testify that the genesis of the missionary journey came from the church at Antioch. Some members of the Antioch church had a vision of Paul and Barnabas being set apart for some works of God. The actions of Paul were not those of a renegade or lone wolf, but were the expressed will of the church.

² It is helpful to know that Tarsus was relatively close to Antioch. In a straight line, Tarsus was about 150 miles away. Jerusalem, on the other hand, is about 330 miles from Antioch.

While they were worshiping the Lord and fasting, the Holy Spirit said, “Set apart for me Barnabas and Saul for the work to which I have called them.” Then after fasting and praying they laid their hands on them and sent them off (Acts 13:2-3).

Barnabas would testify that the missionary journey began on Barnabas’s homeland, the island of Cyprus! The following map shows where the journey went.



The missionary effort was amazing, as Barnabas could explain. The Holy Spirit worked mightily in Paul. Barnabas would explain that they arrived on Cyprus, sailing into the port of Salamis. They wasted no time presenting the Word of God in the synagogues. Going throughout the island, they arrived at the far port of Paphos. Here Barnabas could tell details of an important encounter.

In Paphos, Paul and Barnabas were summoned by the Roman Proconsul Sergius Paulus. The Proconsul kept near him a false Jewish prophet named Elymas Bar-Jesus (“Bar Jesus” meant “Son of Joshua”) who was constantly opposing the teachings of the missionaries, trying to turn away the Proconsul from any faith.

Barnabas would have the ability to give an eye-witness account of what happened.

But Saul, who was also called Paul, filled with the Holy Spirit, looked intently at him [Elymas] and said, ‘You son of the devil, you enemy of all righteousness, full of all deceit and villainy, will you not stop making crooked the straight paths of the Lord? And now, behold, the hand of the Lord is upon you, and you will be blind and unable to see the sun for a time (Acts 13:9-11).

Barnabas could testify that immediately mist and darkness fell on Elymas and the Proconsul “believed” being “astonished at the teaching of the Lord” (Acts 13:12).

In an earlier chapter, I discussed whether Paul had changed his name at some point from Saul. Here we find the Biblical narrative where Paul begins being called by his Roman name Paul rather than his Jewish name Saul. While there is no specific explanation given, there are many reasons that seem reasonable if not obvious. In addition to those given earlier (the inability of Greeks to readily pronounce Saul, for one) there are other considerations of note.

Paul’s common Roman name (“Paulus”) was the very same as that of the Proconsul. It would have been a logical point of connection that Paul would not likely overlook. Second, the Roman Proconsul was not Jewish. Barnabas could testify that Paul was sensitive to this as he interacted with people. Paul would later write,

To the Jews I became as a Jew, in order to win Jews. To those under the law I became as one under the law (though not being myself under the law) that I might win those under the law. To those outside the law I became as one outside the law (not being outside the law of God but under the law of Christ) that I might win those outside the law (1 Cor. 9:19-21).

After their experiences in Paphos, the missionaries, now “Paul and his companions” in Luke’s writing, sailed to the mainland, putting in at Perga (now modern south-central Turkey). Paul and Barnabas did not stay in Perga, but went inland almost immediately, going to Pisidian Antioch to evangelize.

Barnabas could testify to the reasons for this move; however, we can make some good assumptions of what happened, because, in part, of some archaeological finds. One of the most important discoveries that sheds light on Paul’s and Barnabas’s selection of this

area for missionary work is a stone now on display in Yalvac, Turkey. The stone is important in light of Paul and Barnabas's success in seeing the Roman Proconsul Sergius Paulus come to faith on Cyprus.

Sergius Paulus was originally from this area. His family was a prominent family in the Pisidian Antioch region, and archaeologists have uncovered inscriptions of the family name in the region.

For this reason, a number of scholars have traced the logical point that Sergius Paulus would have not only likely sought Paul and Barnabas to go share his new, found faith with his family, but would also have given letters of introduction and recommendation as well.³



One can find this stone on display at the Yalvac Archaeological Museum in Yalvac, Turkey. The stone is seen as confirmation of the large land holdings the family of Sergius Paulus would have had in the area.

Barnabas could speak for certain on this, but it seems the logical conclusion.

While Paul and Barnabas were in Pisidian Antioch, they had a chance to attend synagogue on a Sabbath. Barnabas would testify about the experience. He would aver that "after the reading from the Law and the Prophets, the rulers of the synagogue sent a message to them, saying, 'Brothers, if you have any word of encouragement for the people, say it.'" (Acts 15:15)

Paul accepted the offer and stood to speak. Paul addressed both the Jews in attendance and the Greeks who also attended synagogue. Called "God fearers," these Greeks were interested in the monotheism of Judaism, though they were not born Jewish or converted to Judaism. Paul began,

³ Ben Witherington III, *The Acts of the Apostles, A Socio-Rhetorical Commentary* (Eerdmans 1998) at 403 and cites therein. See also Gill and Gempf, *The Book of Acts in its Graeco-Roman Setting* (WIPF and Stock 2000) at 386-387.

Men of Israel and you who fear God, listen..." (Acts 13:16).

Paul then began discussing God's faithfulness in making the Jews great while in Egypt and then redeeming them from that captivity. God "put up with"⁴ the Jews for 40 years in the wilderness before giving them their inheritance. Paul then recounted God's provisions of judges, prophets, and kings. Paul added that with King David, God promised a Savior through David's offspring. Paul explained that Jesus was this promised Savior. John the Baptist came before Jesus proclaiming a baptism of repentance while noting that one was coming "the sandals of whose feet I am not worthy to untie" (Acts 13:25).

Paul then explained that the rulers in Jerusalem failed to understand the Prophets and the Law and condemned Jesus the Savior. The irony, as Paul explained, was that by attempting to dispel any role Jesus could have among the people as their Messiah, the rulers actually fulfilled the prophecies and brought about Jesus' necessary death. Paul explained that although Jesus was executed and buried, God raised him from the dead.

By testifying to this, Barnabas would be dispelling a key charge of the Jews against Paul. Paul was not discounting the Old Testament and the Law of Moses. Paul was embracing it. Paul was finding it truer than most thought! For Paul, the promises and prophecies were not hollow visions of what might happen one day. They were real. They had been proven real by their direct fulfillment in Jesus of Nazareth.

Paul and Barnabas assured the people that there were many witnesses to the resurrected Lord. Paul and Barnabas had come to Pisidian Antioch to bring them this great news. Paul then cited several Psalms as texts to support the resurrection events.

Paul explained that even the great King David's body was destroyed after death, yet the body of Christ never faced "corruption." In Jesus, Paul explained, was a forgiveness of sins for people. This, Paul said, was the work Habakkuk spoke of when he prophesied, "Look, you scoffers, be astounded and perish; for I am doing a work in your days, a work that you will not believe, even if one tells it to you" (Acts 13:41; Hab. 1:5).

After the synagogue meeting, many came to Paul and Barnabas asking them to stay around and return to speak more on this subject the following Sabbath. The next Sabbath, Paul and Barnabas returned and the audience was huge! Clearly over the week, the people had been talking and promoting the coming service.

As the synagogue began to fill up, it was soon apparent the room was not large enough. Many, if not most of the attendees were Greeks, not Jews! As this began to register to the

⁴ Acts 13:18.

“normal” Jews who usually attended the services, jealousy set in. As the awaited lesson by Paul began, Barnabas could explain how certain Jews began to speak out, trying to contradict Paul and speaking abusively of him (Acts 13:45).

Barnabas would testify that Paul did not back down. He spoke plainly and boldly telling the Jews,

it was necessary that the word of God be spoken first to you. Since you thrust it aside and judge yourself unworthy of eternal life, behold, we are turning to the Gentiles (Acts 13:46).

The Gentiles rejoiced, but the unconverted Jews were not so pleased! Some Jews went to the power brokers in town and managed to generate enough persecution against Paul and Barnabas that they shook the dust off their feet and left the district heading to Iconium. The converted in Pisidian Antioch continued on after Paul left “filled with joy and the Holy Spirit” (Acts 13:52).

To be continued...

POINTS FOR HOME

1. *“A man of many companions may come to ruin, but there is a friend who sticks closer than a brother”* (Prov. 18:24).

Friendship is important, and it goes beyond mere companionship. The proverbs have a lot of wisdom offered on these issues. We need friends, in times of joy, and especially in times of trouble. “A friend loves at all times and a brother is born for adversity” (Pro. 17:17). How do we get these friends?⁵ The global answer is to “love God” and “love your neighbor as yourself.” But the more practical answer is to find other people that you can serve and serve them! Minister to them! Become their friend by what you do for them! How do you find these folks? Get involved! Get involved in Sunday School beyond merely attending. Find a Ladies’ Bible study or a Men’s Bible study group. Get in a Connection Group. Find the Christians at work or school. Then, spend time with them and minister to them. Watch the friendship grow.

2. The Holy Spirit told the church at Antioch to set out Barnabas and Saul “*for the work to which I have called them*” (Acts 13:2)

⁵ C. S. Lewis wrote to Arthur Greeves, his lifelong friend on December 29, 1935, “Friendship is the greatest of worldly goods. Certainly to me it is the chief happiness of life. If I had to give a piece of advice to a young man about a place to live, I think I should say, ‘Sacrifice almost everything to live where you can be near your friends.’ I know I am very fortunate in that respect.”

Mission work is God's work. We see from Luke two perspectives. The earthly perspective has Barnabas and Saul "sent off" by the church (Acts 13:3), but from an eternal perspective, Luke immediately clarifies that they were "being sent out by the Holy Spirit" (Acts 13:4). Even as it is God's work, we can't miss that God uses us to perform his mission. Paul reminded the Romans, "How then will they call on him in whom they have not believed? And how are they to believe in him of whom they have never heard? And how are they to hear without someone preaching? And how are they to preach unless they are sent? As it is written, 'How beautiful are the feet of those who preach the good news!'" (Rom. 10:14-15). We need to be sure we add to our prayers those among us who have gone out into the mission field.

3. "*Every good and perfect gift is from above*" (Jms. 1:17).

The gospel story and the history of the church are based on real events that happened in the everyday lives of real people. God does that. He moves in our lives to give us what we need. I do not want to detract from the gift that is above all others, namely eternal life through the sacrifice of Christ. But I want us to see that God is also working in our lives here, today. He gives us eternal life, but he gives so much more. It is God who gives us "daily bread" (Mt 6:11). He has numbered the hairs on our heads (Mt 10:30). May we believe and see the hand of God in our world and in our lives.