

September 17 – Called to Suffer Second Missionary Journey part I

Scripture Acts 16:6-10

Part of what I enjoy in studying Paul's life is that his humanity clearly shows through. Paul was a great leader, a remarkable theologian, and a courageous apostle. Nevertheless, he was also very human. He was sometimes: ungracious toward those with whom he disagreed; lacked mercy toward those who disappointed him; and displayed more anger than was warranted.

After Paul and Barnabas had been back in Syrian Antioch for some time following their first missionary journey, some people came from Jerusalem saying that unless you were circumcised and followed the Jewish ceremonial laws you could not be saved. Those who came to Antioch were most likely from the same Pharisee party to which Paul had originally belonged. They believed Jesus to be the Jewish Messiah. This, for them, meant that to believe in Jesus also meant being a Jew. They were alarmed with the number of Gentile converts that had swollen the ranks of the church. Particularly concerning to them was the fact that they were being welcomed as equals without having first embraced the Jewish law. They worried that the Jewishness of the church was being watered down. Paul and Barnabas strongly opposed these people. They realized that this discussion would have far-reaching consequences. If these people from Jerusalem prevailed then all of those who had come to accept Jesus as the Messiah, apart from the Jewish laws, would turn away. The mission to the Greek and Roman world would pretty much end. Paul was firmly convinced that salvation came not through the law but through belief in Jesus and living a moral life following his teachings. The leaders of the Antioch church decided to send Paul and Barnabas to Jerusalem, lay this problem before Peter and the other disciples, and get an answer from them.

The position of the Jerusalem group was well known and it would seem that most in Jerusalem were supportive of them. Paul and Barnabas would find it challenging to get them to change their mind. The disciples gathered in a formal way to hear from Paul and Barnabas. This meeting is often called the first Council of the church. It was a pattern that has remained, in that when there are difficult questions to be solved the church gathers together to pray, to listen, and to discern what God would have them do. Even though Paul was a learned theologian, the defense of his actions was not theological. We know he could

have done this because, in some of his letters, he lays out the theology of the doctrine “saved by grace.” Here, instead, he and Barnabas tell stories. They talk about the Gentiles who have come to accept Jesus as the Messiah. They shared how lives had been touched and how God’s Spirit had been made manifest in people’s lives. Their words must have caused Peter to remember his own encounter with the Holy Spirit when he followed God’s leading, went to the home of the Roman Centurion Cornelius, and proclaimed that God makes no difference between people. Peter would remember that when Cornelius accepts Jesus, he baptizes him and his household, and they receive the Holy Spirit. Peter stands up and asserts the rightness of what Paul has been doing. James, the brother of Jesus, who had become the leader of the Jerusalem church, finally proclaims that Gentiles who are turning to Jesus would not have to be circumcised, but were required to follow a few rules about diet and live a moral life. The church then sends Silas and Judas to Antioch with Paul and Barnabas to share their decision.

The Jerusalem group does not give up. Some of them go into Asia Minor to the churches Paul and Barnabas had founded and start telling them that they need to be circumcised to be saved. Paul, in the letter we know as Galatians, writes. “If even an angel from heaven should proclaim to you a gospel contrary to what we proclaimed to you, let that one be accursed.” This, from one sharing the Good News of Jesus who proclaimed love even for enemies! When Paul felt strongly about something he would not be moved one inch and lashed out at those who opposed him.

We again glimpse this rigidity at the beginning of Paul’s second missionary journey. Paul plans to begin by returning to the churches he and Barnabas had founded in Asia Minor to see how they were doing. Barnabas wants to again take along Mark, who had left them early in their first missionary journey. Paul would not hear of it and it says in Acts that their argument became so intense that they went their separate ways. Barnabas who had been such a friend and benefactor to Paul was treated very poorly by him. We know Barnabas is one who always extended grace and was willing to give people a second chance. It was what he had done for Paul. Now he wished to do the same for Mark. Paul could not get past that first failure by the young man and didn’t want to risk it happening again. Even though they disagreed, Paul mentions Barnabas fondly in a couple of his letters

and it is likely the Mark who became a trusted assistant in Paul's later ministry is the same person. He had to prove himself, however, before Paul would accept him.

This discussion about Paul makes us ask, "When have we been so sure of our position that we have become intolerant towards anyone who thought differently from us? When have we refused to give an individual a second chance?" Paul's life reminds us that though our responses are normal, they are not ultimately the way of Christ, and we need to pray for tolerance, for patience and for kindness.

So, Paul takes Silas and goes back to the churches he had founded. This time they go by land instead of sea. It is likely, since the land route was through the area of Tarsus, that Paul was also visiting faithful to whom he had preached during those fourteen years that we know nothing about. When they get to Derbe they meet a young believer named Timothy and they invite him to join them. After visiting all the churches in the area, Paul heads toward Troas. Paul planned to cross into Asia but says he was prevented by the Spirit. What this means has puzzled scholars through the century. What could have stopped such a powerful personality as Paul? There have been many theories, but nothing definite. While in Troas he has a vision of a man calling him to come over into Macedonia, what we would call Eastern Europe. With this prompting by the Spirit they cross the Aegean Sea and travel to the town of Philippi. At about this point Luke joins them because in the Book of Acts the travel narrative becomes first person as Luke describes their shared journey.

Have you ever been prevented from going where you wanted to go and doing what you wanted to do? What were your reactions? Was there an occasion when you experienced disappointment, only to have a new and amazing opportunity open up for you? Have you had a Macedonia Man, a person inviting you to go in a different direction than you had planned? These are questions that this part of Paul's journey asks of us.

At Philippi, he meets Lydia, an independent businesswoman, a merchant selling purple cloth. This was a very prestigious work. She accepts Jesus as her savior and is the first recorded baptism in Europe. Paul and Silas have great success in Philippi. There is a slave girl who constantly follows them proclaiming that Paul and Silas are servants of the most high. Paul, after a while, cannot stand it any longer and commands the spirit to come out of her. She is cured but no longer can she tell fortunes and make money for her owners.

They are outraged and stir up the business community against the two. Paul and Silas are brought before the magistrate and, without any chance for them to share their side of things, are publicly humiliated by being stripped naked, beaten, and then thrown into prison where they are chained in the inner most part, far from light or fresh air.

How would you react to these events if you were Paul? After all, you had been faithful to God, doing what you were supposed to do and all of these evil things happened to you. It would be easy to think you would be angry and disappointed. It wouldn't be much of a stretch to think you would be depressed and wondering if you should even do this anymore. Do you remember what Paul and Silas' response was? They had a prayer service singing psalms and praising God! They believed that God had something important for them to do because of these events or at least believed God was with them, strengthening them, and keeping them faithful. There is an earthquake and their chains are broken and the door is set ajar. The jailer, who was responsible for the prisoners, was about to take his life when Paul called out to him that all were still there. He is so moved by their compassion towards him that he brings them out of the jail, washes their wounds, hears the good news, and becomes a convert. When morning comes, the magistrate orders them released. Paul will not hear of it. Both he and Silas are Roman citizens and because of that, what had occurred was illegal. Legal protections, including the right to a trial, was one of the reasons citizenship was so valued. The magistrate could have been arrested for what he had done to the two men. Paul demands that he comes in person and asks them to leave the prison. In fear he does this telling them to leave the city. Paul take his own sweet time, visiting Lydia again before heading on.

We will talk about the rest of this second journey next week. But think about the times you have had to suffer. What was your response? Did you complain, feeling God had abandoned you, or did you trust that God was with you, and, that in being faithful, you could be a witness to others? Paul challenges each of us by our actions to remain faithful in challenging times. We all will face suffering, we will be disappointed by the way people act, and we will be challenged as to our opinions. Sometimes we will get it right in our response. When we do we will praise God. When we make mistakes we will ask for forgiveness, learn from them and move on.