

WALKING ACROSS TURKEY

I do run into people from time to time who do not like Saul of Tarsus. That always makes me sad. Usually it turns out that they don't know very much about Paul, or they have started out with prejudices they picked up from someone else, or they have pigeonholed Paul into some pretty nasty categories without paying much attention to the information we have about him. In any case, Paul's studies and his writings (that is, his theology) have obviously had enormous influence on the Christian church from the very beginning. It nevertheless seems clear to me that Paul's life story is not nearly as well known. If we pay attention to the records we have, is there any way to duck or deny the fact that Paul was the quintessential illustration of a convert who truly and sincerely wanted to "follow Jesus"?

We talked not so long ago about Paul's Damascus Road encounter with the Risen Jesus. After a little flurry of activity in Damascus itself, a trip to the Holy Mountain, and a relatively short visit with some of the disciples in Jerusalem, Paul is "sent" back home to Tarsus. He will be there, and we will have no news about him, for about ten years. What have *you* been doing for the past ten years? Or what *will* you be doing for the next ten? Then Barnabas – excited about the church at Antioch (in Syria) and about Gentiles who are responding to the Gospel, and probably remembering Paul talking about his commission to be an apostle to the Gentiles – goes to Tarsus to find Paul. They come back to Antioch and spend a year there together, teaching and preaching. Then the Holy Spirit sets them apart to carry the mission beyond Antioch. The church lays its hands on them, and they go off together (with John Mark) on what we call the first missionary journey.

Paul is far from being the only faithful or influential Christian in the early church. But from the records we have, it seems clear that Paul is far and away the most influential apostle of them all. Even Peter cannot begin to compete with Paul's record (churches started, converts made, message clarified and spread). Yet Paul had never walked with Jesus. Is that not amazing? And does it not mean that we can be faithful too – just as faithful as any of the original eleven? Well, Paul, by his own word, is nothing apart from Jesus. But how is it that

he is able to accomplish so much? In seminary, we used to quip that if Paul had been given a typewriter and a bicycle, there wouldn't have been anything left for the rest of us to do.

Paul does have some very real and practical advantages: He is a Roman citizen. He had grown up speaking Greek as well as Hebrew. He had been rabbinically trained in Jerusalem, probably from about age twelve – and under Gamaliel, one of the greatest rabbis of that time. Tarsus is famous as a center of Stoicism. Many have wondered if a Jew living in Tarsus would have had much conversation or connections with the Hellenistic culture or the school of Stoicism in Tarsus. Paul does seem to have some values and approaches that remind us of Stoicism. In any case, he is comfortable with Greek and with the thought-forms and beliefs of Hellenism. None of the original twelve have these advantages.

Along with all these things, Paul develops a strategy. If you were to think about going out into the Roman Empire to start churches and win people to Christianity, what would you do? There are huge, wealthy, successful pagan temples in every city across the Roman Empire. There are the so-called “mystery religions” (Mithraism and the cult of Osiris being the most influential), which have considerable power and appeal. Hellenism is proud of its philosophical schools and teachers. Who needs or wants to listen to some relatively poor and uncredentialed “street preachers” from Palestine? Well, Paul has more credentials than it looks like on the surface, but nevertheless: where do you go and how do you begin?

Most of the early Christians, like most of the Christians in our time, have no plan. They haven't really thought about it very much. Jesus had said to the apostles: “*Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you. And behold, I am with you always, to the end of the age.*” (Matthew 28:19-20) But what does that have to do with just plain ordinary Christians? They are busy making a living; taking care of their families; paying taxes; learning to use the increasing number of gadgets being invented to help them save time.

But Paul cannot duck his conversion so easily. He has received a direct commission to become an apostle to the Gentiles. So he *does* think about it. It is his top priority. It still takes him ten to thirteen years to figure out what to do about it. Maybe even then he “stumbles into it”

as much from the faithfulness of Barnabas and the church at Antioch as from his own pondering. When we pay attention to the information we have about him, Paul's strategy gets clearer and clearer: Wherever he goes, his first step is to visit the synagogue on the Sabbath. Because he is a rabbi, he knows he will be invited to preach. He also knows he has a Message – an astounding Message that is both exciting and controversial. And of course he himself believes this Message deeply and passionately. There are synagogues in nearly every city and town in the empire. And on the fringe of every synagogue, there are Gentiles who come to listen – apparently intrigued by the powerful message and vision of Torah, a way of righteousness in an unrighteous world. So Paul preaches. Some are persuaded, and some are intrigued. But as weeks go by, there is always a growing opposition from the Jewish community that does not like all the newness and challenge of the Jesus Paul preaches. It sounds very “Jewish” in many ways, but it goes way beyond what any of them are familiar with or comfortable with. It is too close to the fulfillment and promises of everything Judaism has ever believed in. Fairly quickly, the opposition forms, and it grows determined to drive Paul out.

Yet that is also part of Paul's plan. When the synagogue turns against him, Paul will take with him those who have been persuaded. This will become the nucleus of a Christian church in that town or city. This church will only be a handful of believers – a little band of followers who are already discovering that the Risen Lord is real. How do I know this is true? Because Paul will very shortly leave them to go on to the next place – and they will not disintegrate or forget or go back to their former lives. Most of them will still live in the same place, have the same neighbors, do the same tasks. But there will be something very new and filled with hope and eagerness added in now. Their numbers will grow by sheer attraction (not promotion). Because some of their friends and relatives live in other towns and villages, new churches will be formed in neighboring towns as well. As all of us know, nothing like this ever happens by chance. Such things cannot be sustained by accident. We cannot explain any of it just by thinking about what Paul is doing or saying. The Message is powerful, almost like it has a life of its own. And the Holy Spirit is at work, or what is happening could not be happening.

And there will always be that other factor: a growing opposition of considerable anger and animosity. Paul will nearly always be beaten or banished or punished in some way for bringing this Message of peace and love – this Word about the Messiah who was crucified but is now Risen. Opposition is always the other side of the coin. Licking

his wounds, Paul will go on to the next town and do it all over again. As I keep reminding you: This is not ethereal. This is not metaphor or merely symbolic. Can you imagine seeing Paul with his shirt off? His back would have been one big mass of scar tissue. Five times he had received the forty lashes minus one. Many men died from just one such beating, often from the infection that followed. Here is the account:

“Are they Hebrews? So am I. Are they Israelites? So am I. Are they offspring of Abraham? So am I. Are they servants of Christ? I am a better one (I am talking like a madman) – with far greater labors, far more imprisonments, with countless beatings, and often near death. Five times I received at the hands of the Jews the forty lashes less one. Three times I was beaten with rods. Once I was stoned. Three times I was shipwrecked; a night and a day I was adrift at sea; on frequent journeys, in danger from rivers, danger from robbers, danger from my own people, danger from Gentiles, danger in the city, danger in the wilderness, danger at sea, danger from false brothers; in toil and hardship, through many a sleepless night, in hunger and thirst, often without food, in cold and exposure. And, apart from other things, there is the daily pressure on me of my anxiety for all the churches. Who is weak, and I am not weak? Who is made to fall, and I am not indignant?” (II Corinthians 11:22-28)

And Paul was actually stoned at Lystra. Who survives being stoned? Almost nobody, ever.

We are doing Review & Renew. Most of you have heard these things before, but that does not mean we have heard them enough. Today I want to remind us about what appears to be only an interlude in Paul’s life – a few verses at the beginning of the sixteenth chapter of the Book of Acts. We pick it up at the tail end of chapter fifteen. Paul and Barnabas had completed their first journey. They were now already famous in Christian circles, and were starting to become infamous in many Jewish circles. The church at Antioch had sent them to a council at Jerusalem, because the controversy over Gentiles coming into the church was already getting severe. It would soon be the hottest issue in the early church. That is, the most controversial argument dividing the early Christians for the first fifty or sixty years of our history was not about Christology, theology, ecology, economics, or helping the poor. It was about whether Gentiles could become Christians without converting completely to Judaism as well. But we will bypass that for the moment.

After returning to Antioch, Paul and Barnabas both assumed they should go off on a second missionary journey. They never made it. They would never work together again. Sometimes in our own day, a quarrel arises between two Christians. Bystanders, spectators – people who are not even familiar with the reasons for the quarrel – will often say wise and judgmental things like: “If these people were real Christians – if they were real followers of Jesus – this kind of quarreling and anger would never take place, or at least it would quickly be resolved.”

So who was no real Christian, Barnabas or Paul? John Mark (who later wrote the Gospel of Mark) had deserted them on the first journey. Mark was Barnabas’ cousin and Barnabas wanted to give him another chance. Paul was not willing to let Mark come on the next journey because Paul had not seen any evidence that Mark had repented (learned, changed, grown) after deserting them on the first journey. Being an apostle was a tough but crucial assignment in Paul’s mind, and you couldn’t afford to take someone who might abandon you when the chips were down. “Principles, not personalities.” That is, we cannot just be people-pleasers. There was more at stake than just being nice to Mark. So one of the greatest friendships of the New Testament was broken. (Acts 15:36-47) It is certainly reason to weep. But perhaps not much reason to feel superior or judgmental. Have any of you ever lost a friend – I mean a Christian friend – along the Way? I have lost five of them. Sometimes it was mostly my fault. Sometimes it was a misunderstanding but I couldn’t find a way to get a fresh hearing. Sometimes there didn’t seem to be a way for genuine repentance to come into play. Two were over theological differences – that is, “faith” didn’t help, but actually caused the rift in the first place. Well, it’s not over ’til it’s over, and we still have the realms to come. By the way, there are numerous other instances where relationships were broken but I and my friends, with the help of the Spirit, found the grace to heal the wounds. We don’t win ’em all, but we don’t lose ’em all either – thank God.

In any case, Barnabas goes off with Mark (to Cypress), and Paul goes with Silas into what we call the second missionary journey. The actual second journey begins at Acts 16:11, but I want to talk about the first ten verses. First of all, Paul is supposed to be a veteran by this time. He is the best “Evangelist to the Gentiles” in the business. Silas has come with him *assuming* that Paul knows what he’s doing. They go by land (by foot) from Syrian Antioch this time. They go through Tarsus, Paul’s hometown, north through the Cilician Gates, and back through the territory Paul and Barnabas had covered on the first journey. They

pick up Timothy in Lystra. Lystra, remember, is where Paul had been stoned and left for dead.

Paul knows his primary commission is to be an apostle to the Gentiles. That is, his primary assignment – straight from the Risen Jesus – is to expand the mercy and invitation of God to include the Gentiles. Is it then confusing that Paul keeps going to the synagogue first? People have sometimes said to me: “He was supposed to be going to Gentiles. Why did he still keep preaching to Jews? Maybe that’s why he got into so much trouble. He wasn’t paying attention to his instructions – to the assignment Jesus had given him.” Maybe so. Paul does continue to preach to Jews whenever he gets a chance. And they are the ones who end up hating him so fiercely. If someone kept visiting our churches, splitting them, and taking a lot of our members off to form new congregations in what looked to us to be some “new religion,” we probably wouldn’t like it much either.

On the other hand, Paul has to start somewhere. As I reminded us earlier: In Paul’s time, there was always a Gentile contingent hanging around the fringe of nearly every synagogue. Since Paul had been raised in Tarsus – that is, in a synagogue in pagan territory – he knows these things. But whether we understand it or not, Paul starts in the synagogues. I think he is really after the Gentiles on the fringe, but we know for sure that he hopes to pick up as many Jews as he can as well. To Paul, Christianity is not a new religion; it is the obvious and clear fulfillment of everything Judaism had been looking forward to all along. It’s just a matter of Jews catching on – seeing it, understanding it. He wants his Jewish brothers and sisters to realize the glory of what God is doing; he wants it so badly. We remember also that Judaism and Christianity did not officially split until about twenty years after Paul had died. So what looks clear to us about Christianity versus Judaism was not at all clear in Paul’s time.

Anyway, Paul circumcises Timothy so that Timothy will not be an immediate stumbling block to every Jewish community they visit. Just a little side comment: Does Paul ever learn, change his mind, grow? If Scripture is inerrant, then nobody can change or grow! You do understand that, right? Paul will write to the Galatians (that is, the Christians of Pisidian Antioch, Iconium, Lystra, Derbe) and say: “*Listen! I, Paul, am telling you that if you let yourselves be circumcised, Christ will be of no benefit to you. [Yet he had circumcised Timothy.] Once again I testify to every man who lets himself be circumcised that he is obliged*

to obey the entire law. You who want to be justified by the law have cut yourselves off from Christ; you have fallen away from grace. For through the Spirit, by faith, we eagerly wait for the hope of righteousness. For in Christ Jesus neither circumcision nor uncircumcision counts for anything; the only thing that counts is faith working through love.” (Galatians 5:2-6)

Can you detect any change in Paul’s attitude toward circumcision? Scripture cannot be inerrant because people are not inerrant, and we are not *supposed* to be. We stay awake and alive – we learn and grow. That means we sometimes change, and therefore our opinions and our advice change too. Do you *always* regret your mistakes? Do you not sometimes rejoice in them, realizing that the Holy Spirit is revealing new truth to you through them?

Paul is walking across Turkey. No buses. No trains. Not even a bicycle. As far as we know, Paul never even takes a donkey to carry the gear. When Paul needs supplies, he stops along the way and makes tents (canvas goods) to get enough money for his needs. (He is probably a craftsman with Cilician wool.) He has to purchase materials (the wool), find a customer, and arrange to weave or sew whatever article is wanted, in exchange for enough money to purchase supplies. He obviously cannot do that on the run. It will take several days, maybe even weeks, to accomplish all of that. Even so, there are no supermarkets, no restaurants, no public transportation. Paul is not only walking – he is working his way across Turkey.

Sometimes it’s cold; sometimes hot; sometimes windy; sometimes raining (or even snowing). Silas and now Timothy are some protection against robbers. But anyway we imagine it, this is hard going. At least we would think so if we were the ones doing it. But finally they get beyond Pisidian Antioch and into new terrain. And here is what I really want you to think about. (Acts 16:6-7)

Paul wants to go to Ephesus, but the Holy Spirit forbids it. How do you understand that? What could possibly be wrong with spreading the word in Asia? Isn’t that what Christians are supposed to do: spread the word, preach the gospel, make disciples of all nations? Of course, yes! But not according to our own devices. Only with the presence and guidance of the Holy Spirit. His way – all the way! That is, we are never free to design our lives or our work without guidance from the Holy Spirit, no matter how faithful we think we are. (How many serious blunders of attitude, approach, and purpose have we made in our missionary

efforts – good people trying to do good in our own way and by our own best logic?)

So let us take notice of how Paul is conducting his life. He has become a man of prayer – like his Master was before him. He does not run his own life. Even though he is appointed to be an apostle to the Gentiles, even though he has already completed one missionary journey, even though he is walking across Turkey at great risk and with considerable effort on his part – none of this is enough. He cannot merely do it by his own reason or opinions. He cannot merely follow the guidelines that most modern Christians would insist were quite sufficient. That is, he cannot just quote a Bible verse, follow it by his own logic and, in doing so, be faithful. (By the way, Paul probably wrote that Bible verse in the first place.) No, Paul is seeking and obeying the current instructions from his daily prayers. “Holy Spirit, I am not running this show; You are. Even though I look like a fool to Silas and Timothy, and to the whole world for that matter, I am here to do what *You* want – what *You* tell me to do.” Paul’s own best thinking says Ephesus is the next best place to carry the Gospel and the mission. But that is not enough for him. By the way, Ephesus will be the place he is sent to a few years later. So Paul is not stupid or careless; he’s just off on the timing.

We have realized that Paul has unusual credentials, and far more than the other apostles of his time. And we have realized that Paul has developed a strategy – a difficult and painful strategy, but a very effective one nonetheless. And now we realize the most important factor of all: Paul, like Jesus before him, is a man of prayer. Since there is a lot of prayer going on in Judaism, we can only surmise that Paul has learned this particular kind of personal, obedient, guidance-based prayer from knowing Jesus. In any case, watching Paul walking across Turkey, we realize how genuine and serious he is about following the Holy Spirit.

Okay, so we cannot go to Asia (and Ephesus). How about north? Bithynia is a fascinating possibility, and Byzantium is especially alluring. But “*the Spirit of Jesus did not allow them.*” In passing, we would do well to note that the Holy Spirit and “the Spirit of Jesus” are synonymous. I think that’s wonderful, but lots of Christians do not seem to notice it. Paul knows it from his encounter on the Damascus Road, of course.

Okay, so we cannot go west into Asia or north into Bithynia. Where in the blankety-blank “sam hill” *are* we supposed to go? Here is the quotation from Acts, in case you think I’m exaggerating: “*And they went*

through the region of Phrygia and Galatia, having been forbidden by the Holy Spirit to speak the word in Asia. And when they had come up to Mysia, they attempted to go into Bithynia, but the Spirit of Jesus did not allow them. So, passing by Mysia, they went down to Troas.” Such a tame and inane little verse, but it covers *months* of wonderment and frustration.

“*Having been forbidden by the Holy Spirit to speak the word in Asia,*” Paul and his tiny band of three walk all the way across Turkey until the land runs out. They come to Troas, on the shore of the Aegean Sea. Then they run into a stranger – a pagan, a Greek, a physician – by the name of Luke. He will become the best human friend Paul ever had. But that is years into the future. For now, Luke persuades them to come across the sea to Macedonia. And the Spirit confirms.

I am stunned. How long a journey had it been to get from Antioch to Troas? How many temptations had there been along the way to do something – anything? Anything to move out of the uncertainty; anything to show, or at least pretend, that we know what we are doing. And now the real story kicks into high gear – because Paul has been faithful enough not only to be out there, but faithful enough to let the Holy Spirit guide and direct him every day, and every step of the way. The Holy Spirit of the Risen Lord is his real partner, helping with every decision. And so Paul gets into enormous trouble and endures unbelievable hardship and persecution. But he is also unbelievably – almost impossibly– effective, fruitful, faithful, and productive.

Do you know where Turkey is in your own life? And do you allow the Holy Spirit to guide you in all your efforts and affairs?