

"On the Road Again"
Sermon Series on *The Way of the Spirit!*
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Acts 13:13-52 (selected)
June 21, 2015

Introduction.

Have you ever had a terrible experience while traveling somewhere – a time when, despite your best efforts to plan and prepare, it just didn't work out right? You missed your flight, they lost your bags, you had a flat tire, or you were misplaced while you were at a child at the rest stop. Is there anything more frustrating than being on a trip, trying to get to your destination, and everything goes wrong?

This past week I traveled to Boston for some study leave, and on Thursday I was trying to fly back to the Greensboro airport. The return flight was delayed because of the weather in Philadelphia, and I was worried I was going to miss my connecting flight there. So I contacted a ticket agent and was able to persuade him to transfer me to a flight on another airline and fly me home through Atlanta. Clever plan, I thought.

However, the flight to Atlanta was also delayed – twice! Once before we took off, and another time after we landed. We actually sat on the tarmac for over 50 minutes after getting to Atlanta because they didn't have a gate for us. I missed my connecting flight to Greensboro by 20 minutes.

Fortunately, there was another flight that night to PTI, but it, too, was delayed and didn't leave until midnight. I was able to get on that flight and finally got home and fell into bed at 3 am the next day. It was a very long trip.

I suspect all of us have stories we could tell about troubles we've experienced while traveling. But I would suggest that most missionaries have tales they could tell that would make our travels seem easy by comparison. Lorie has some wild stories of international travel she could share with you that would curl your hair.

Missionary travels to other countries have particular challenges, and we read about some of them in the story of the journey which the first missionaries made from Cyprus to Pisidian Antioch. Let's take a closer look as we study Acts 13.

I. A Shift in Leadership.

In verse 13 of our passage we read, "*From Paphos, Paul and his companions sailed north to Perga in Pamphylia.*" In this short sentence which begins the passage there is a subtle but important shift in the emphasis on who the leader of this missionary team was. You'll recall from our previous study of the book of Acts that Barnabas and Paul had been partners in ministry for quite some time, and whenever their names were listed in the book of Acts it was Barnabas and Paul, Barnabas and Paul, Barnabas and Paul. But now in verse 13 of our passage, the order and the emphasis is changed. It's no longer Barnabas and Paul. The order now is Paul and Barnabas, and the passage even begins by referencing the group as "*Paul and his companions.*"

Why the change in emphasis? Why reverse the order? We're not really sure, but it's not very difficult to imagine that over time Paul grew in the development of his gifts. Increasingly, he was coming into his own as a preacher, teacher, and missionary leader. God had given him an amazing mind and a determined spirit, along with a world-class education, and the Lord continued to develop all these things as Paul grew in his faith and in his leadership. Over time it became obvious that Paul was more gifted than Barnabas, and he began to take the lead in their missionary enterprise.

However, I want you to notice that even though this shift in leadership takes place, it doesn't appear that it was a difficult thing for Barnabas to accept and deal with. We don't read of any argument or struggle for power, and no protest is recorded. I think that's a remarkable tribute to the incredible humility of Barnabas. He really was, as his nickname said, a "son of encouragement." Barnabas was willing to take the back seat and give the top billing to the apostle Paul.

Can you imagine Courier and Ives becoming Ives and Courier? Or Abercrombie and Fitch becoming Fitch and Abercrombie? Or Barnes and Noble becoming Noble and Barnes? (Now, hold on a minute! Now you've gone too far!)

The great conductor Leonard Bernstein was once asked, "Which instrument in an orchestra was the most difficult to play?" He thought about it for a moment, and then he said, "The most difficult instrument to play in an orchestra is second fiddle! I can get plenty of first violinists, but to find someone who can play the second fiddle with enthusiasm - that's a problem. And if we have no second fiddle, we have no harmony."

That really is true, isn't it? Most of us want to be number *one*, the *first* chair, the *senior* vice president, or the *top dog* in the pack. And it's troubling whenever we feel like we're falling behind, or another person is getting ahead of us. Just about every organization I know and every social circle I've ever been a part of has a pecking order. You always know where you stand in the food chain, don't you? And it feels like everyone is trying to elbow their way to the top.

Barnabas gives us a beautiful picture of someone who isn't afraid to let another person shine and move ahead of them. He doesn't appear to be worried about who gets the top billing or who receives the credit. Maybe he learned from the life of John the Baptist, the forerunner to Jesus, who said of Christ, "He must increase, and I must decrease." Or maybe he learned from Jesus Himself, who the Bible says "*did not regard equality with God as something to be grasped but He humbled Himself and took on the form of a servant*" (Phil. 2).

I know I need to learn more humility as I seek to follow Christ. Maybe you do too. Did someone in your company get promoted ahead of you? Did you lose your starting position on the team to another player? Does it feel like others are getting ahead, and your falling behind? Then revisit this passage again later this week, and think about Barnabas, and John the Baptist, and Jesus. Remember that when the disciples were arguing about who was going to be the greatest in the kingdom, Jesus said, "*Anyone who wants to be first must be the very last, and the servant of all*" (Mk. 10:35), and He said, "*The Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give His life as a ransom for many*" (Mk. 10:45). Barnabas learned these lessons well.

II. Some Troubles on Their Travels.

The passage tells us that the trio of missionaries left Cyprus and sailed to Perga in Pamphylia. Then from Perga they went on to Pisidian Antioch (another Antioch than the one we studied a couple of weeks ago – this one is located in modern day Turkey). Along the way, they

encountered several challenging problems.

The **first problem** they had to deal with was that **John Mark left the missionary team**, and he returned to Jerusalem. Later on in Acts 15, it becomes clear that Mark had deserted them and abandoned the mission. Was he homesick? Did he resent the fact that Paul was becoming the leader of their team over his cousin Barnabas? Or were the ardors of international travel just too much for him to handle? We're not really sure. What we do know is that he abandoned the team and gave up in the middle of their mission.

The **second problem** the missionaries encountered was that in order to get to Pisidian Antioch, you had to make **a difficult climb over the Taurus Mountains**. It was a climb of over 3,600 feet, and the road was known to be filled with bandits. Then they had to travel another 100 miles past the mountain range in order to reach their destination. And they did this all on foot. Travel in antiquity was a dangerous proposition, and the obstacles one encountered could be extremely daunting at times.

The **final problem** they had to deal with isn't actually recorded in this passage. But from Paul's letter to the churches in Galatia that were founded in this region, we learn that when Paul reached these cities in the south Galatian plateau, **he was suffering from some kind of debilitating illness** (Gal. 4).

According to the letter, he was disfigured in some way, and it affected his eyesight. Some scholars suggest this may have been Paul's "thorn in his flesh" which he writes about in 2 Corinthians, or that he contracted malaria when he was on the coast in Perga. We don't know for sure. Whatever it was, it took a toll on his body, and he had to battle this physical health challenge along with all the other setbacks they experienced.

This passage serves as a good reminder that whenever we follow Jesus in this life, it isn't a guarantee that everything is going to work out well or that it will be smooth sailing all the way. The Christian life is filled with all kinds of challenges and obstacles, and they are part of the school of discipleship God uses to build our character in Christ and keep us dependent on Him.

I think you and I have become accustomed to what one writer calls "decaffeinated Christianity." It's a Christianity that won't keep you awake at night! But the Christian life isn't easy, and most of us aren't very comfortable with this fact. We like the old hymn – "Every day with Jesus is Sweeter than the day before." But the problem is that hymn isn't true. There are many difficult days we have to live whenever we follow Jesus, no matter how great our faith might be.

Suffering is simply a part of the normal Christian life in a fallen world, so don't be surprised when it comes your way. There will be times when we don't achieve success. There will be moments when we have disagreements, and people abandon us. And our faith in Jesus will not protect us from getting sick or having to deal with disease. Lorie and I can attest to that. Our calling in Christ is to be faithful with whatever comes our way and whatever God asks us to do, even in times of trouble.

III. The Heart of the Gospel.

Despite the problems, Paul and Barnabas traveled from Perga over the mountains and finally arrived in Pisidian Antioch. It was a Roman colony, and it was also the military center of the southern half of the province of Galatia. On the Jewish Sabbath, which is on Saturday, the missionaries went to the synagogue and joined the Jewish community in worshipping God.

At some point in the service, the ruler of the synagogue invited Paul and Barnabas to speak if

they wanted to and bring a word from God. Remember, Barnabas was a Levite who served in the temple in Jerusalem before he became a Christian, and Paul was a rabbi who had been a disciple of the famous Gamaliel. Both men were probably dressed like rabbis, and, because it was customary in Jewish circles to invite visiting rabbis to preach, it's not surprising that they would be invited to say something.

Paul went on to deliver the first sermon he preached that is recorded in Scripture, and it's interesting to study exactly what he said. This morning when the passage was read, we didn't read the whole sermon in the interest of time – it's the longest sermon Luke records in the book of Acts. And I would encourage you to go back and read it sometime later this afternoon or in the coming week and study it for yourself.

For our purposes now, I simply want to highlight the three main points Paul made in his message. First, he talked about *the faithfulness of God in the past and His saving acts in history*. The apostle pointed to the events of the Exodus from Egypt and God's provision of the Promised Land. He also traced the history of Israel through the time of the Judges, and the prophet Samuel. And he referenced the time when Israel asked for a king and Saul was appointed by God, who was then followed by the greatest king in Israel's history –David.

Next the apostle *talked about Jesus*, who was a descendent of King David, and he described the events of *Jesus' life, ministry, death and resurrection*. This was followed with *support from Old Testament* which told of *the coming Messiah*, and Paul explained how Jesus fulfilled all these promises.

Finally, Paul concluded his message with *an invitation to make a choice*. Forgiveness of sins is offered to everyone, and anyone who believes in Christ can be reconciled to God in a way the Law of Moses could never accomplish. This was the essential *Kerygma* Paul proclaimed that day which was consistent with the preaching of all the other apostles in Scripture.

The reaction of the people is telling. Many were interested in what Paul and Barnabas had to say, and they invited them to come back the next week and tell them more. However, the next Sabbath, when just about the whole city showed up, the Jewish faithful became jealous and they spoke abusively against the two missionaries.

Eventually, Paul and Barnabas became a distraction to the work God was doing in Galatia, so they left the region. In an act of protest against those who abused them, they shook the dust off their feet and then traveled on to Iconium further inland. The church in Galatia had been established, and the passage says *"the disciples were filled with joy and with the Holy Spirit"* (Acts 13:52). God used the efforts of these two missionaries to plant a church that would impact the whole region. It's a remarkable story.

Conclusion.

As we close this morning, there is one final matter I want to return to and touch on. It has to do with the moment when John Mark abandoned the missionary team and returned to Jerusalem. I think there have been times when all of us have been tempted to give up and wanted to go home.

When has this happened in your life? Maybe it was when you were taking piano lessons, or learning to play a musical instrument. You quit taking the lessons, and you regret it to this day. Perhaps you allowed your boyfriend to take advantage of you, and you feel the sting of shame. Maybe you're thinking about giving up on your marriage, or quitting your job, or caving in to your child's demands. Maybe you've given up following Jesus because being a disciple is just

too hard.

There is a great deal to be said for sticking with something and not giving up, even when it gets hard. Especially when it gets hard. Anyone can be a quitter. But it takes a person of great character to ride it out to the end and see the task to completion. And to those who learn perseverance in times of trial, God has a special reward — the joy and satisfaction of accomplishing something great and not giving up.

I close with this. This is a picture of Marian Wallace, Lorie's mother when she was in her 20s. (Lorie looks a lot like her mom, don't you think?) Lorie's mother grew up on a small farm in eastern Ohio near the Pennsylvania border in the early part of the last century. When she was 10-years-old, she helped her father Larimer and her brother Russ at harvest time. One of her jobs was to stand on the hay wagon and guide the horses with the reigns in her hands while Larimer and Russ loaded the hay which had been cut and threw it onto the wagon. Eventually, the hay would stack up 12 to 15 feet high around Marian so that you couldn't see her buried down inside it. There was a post behind her on the wagon that held the hay up.

One day when she was 10-years-old, as they were gathering in the hay, one of the men scooped up a pile that had a hornet's nest in it. At first, the hornets tried to attack Larimer and Russ, but they were pretty effective at shooing the hornets away and dashed around in a variety of directions. So the hornets, still angry at having their nest disturbed, focused their attention on the next thing they could find. Marian was buried down in the hay, so they ignored her. Instead, the hornets attacked the rear end of the two horses pulling the hay wagon. They bore down and lit into those horses like there was no tomorrow.

You can imagine what happened next. The horses took off across the field as fast as they could run, hauling the wagon behind them with little Marian hanging on for dear life. Hay was tossed to and fro, and things were flying off right and left. Larimer and Russ took off after the run-away wagon, trying to catch up, fearing the worst of what might have happened to Marian. When the horses finally came to a stop at the other end of the field, Larimer and his son ran up to the wagon, wondering if Marian was even alive. Much to their surprise, there she was, still hidden under some of the hay, wide-eyed and shaken, but still standing at her post with the reigns still in her hands.

That is a picture of Mom Wallace throughout her whole life. She was always at her post, with the reigns in her hands to the very end, no matter what happened. She never quit. May we never quit as we follow Jesus in the coming days. Amen.