

MONDAY 15 August 2022 "Heading Home" (Acts 14:21-26)

Good Monday morning to you my "Walking with Jesus" friends,

When you are working on a project, do you enjoy the final stage and then bringing it all to completion? We've been traveling with Paul and Barnabas on their first missionary journey as they brought the story of Jesus and His good news to several cities in what would today be called Central Turkey. Today let's join them as they turn onto the final lap back to Syrian Antioch where they started several months earlier.

Dr. Luke has been giving us the travel log he wrote found in Acts 13 & 14 in the Bible. This past weekend we saw that the town of Derbe was the farthest point to which they traveled on this journey, and *even though it might have been a welcome and very interesting next stop to simply keep going east and south to Tarsus, Paul's home, they sensed the Holy Spirit urged them to retrace their steps visiting each of those towns where they had spent time sharing the story of Jesus, even though they had experienced opposition in each town various forms.*

Oh, how I wish we had great detail from Luke about what they encountered as they came back through Lystra, where Paul and Barnabas had at first been celebrated as presumed gods, but then Paul was attacked with a shower of stones which nearly killed him. We don't know how long they stayed but I have to believe it was a remarkable visit in which Paul, with renewed vigor, passionately proclaimed the wonders and truths of Jesus Christ, inviting Lystrans to turn to Jesus and trust Him as their Savior. *We don't know but I wonder if perhaps Paul and Barnabas were welcomed into the home of Timothy and his parents as a place of lodging for those days, they revisited Lystra.*

Then, on they walked to Iconium and then Pisidian Antioch for their return visit to each of these towns. Again, we have no details of how long they stayed there, with whom they stayed, or how often they gathered the Christians together to teach them more of Jesus. But Luke gives us this very interesting statement: **"Paul and Barnabas returned to Lystra, Iconium and Pisidian Antioch strengthening the disciples and encouraging them to stay true to the faith."** (Acts 14:21,22) That tells me the meetings Paul and Barnabas had in each town, with the followers of Jesus there, were *times of great teaching of doctrinal truths which the Holy Spirit was teaching Paul and which were the spiritual uniqueness's of being followers of Jesus.* I suspect in these meetings Paul began to teach them truths he later wrote in his letters, especially the book of Romans.

Luke tells us Paul and Barnabas did one more important thing in each town: **"Paul and Barnabas appointed 'elders' for them in each 'church' and with prayer and fasting committed them to the Lord, in whom they had put their trust."** (Acts 14:23)

Do you see the strategic significance of this my friends? These little groups of Christians in Derbe, Lystra, Iconium and Pisidian Antioch were now being called "church". Remember that word, "ekklesia" means "called out people". Specifically, it means a people called by God to come out from living in sin darkness, out from the wickedness of the world, trust in Jesus for their deliverance from their sin and be transformed by the work of the Holy Spirit!

Each of these groups of Jesus followers had experienced the wonderful presence of Paul and Barnabas with them for a short time in two visits. They did not know if these ambassadors of Jesus would ever return to their towns. The New Testament was not yet written. *All they had was what they had learned in these brief visits with Paul and Barnabas, and of course their fledgling faith in Jesus Christ, and their reliance on the Holy Spirit to keep nurturing them and teaching them in their newfound spiritual lives!* But how would they stay connected with each other? How would they keep learning and growing? What should they do about the practicality of living very counterculture lives in towns that had brutalized Paul and Barnabas, and had rejected the Gospel of Jesus Christ??

As with any new movement, they needed to develop some unity between them, and they needed some leadership to help them develop this new movement of Jesus followers in their town. So, the Holy Spirit led Paul and Barnabas to identify leaders, teachers, 'elders' they were called, in each town among these groups of new Christians. There were no books written on this, no seminars to attend, no guidelines to follow, this was Jesus doing what He had promised when He said, **"I will build My church..."** (Matt. 16:18) And Jesus was doing that here by instructing Paul and Barnabas to identify and commission spiritual leadership for each town. Years later Paul wrote to Timothy some wonderful guidelines about selecting these spiritual leader men and what their roles should be in their church. (1 Timothy 3)

Years later the apostle Peter wrote this reminding these leaders that their primary role is to be SHEPHERDS of the people: **"To the elders among you, I appeal as a fellow elder...be shepherds of God's flock that is under your care, serving as overseers, not because you must but because you are willing, as God wants you to be, not greedy for money, but eager to serve, not lording it over those entrusted to you but being examples to the flock..."** (1 Peter 5:1-4) As you look at the spiritual movement of Jesus in your town, if there is such a movement, may I ask... *who are those whom you believe JESUS has selected, gifted and called to be such shepherd leaders of the flock of Jesus followers where you live? How is the Holy Spirit working in and through them?*

Can you imagine my friends, the farewell in each of these towns when these little groups of new Christians bid farewell to Paul and Barnabas? Luke then tells us: **"After going through Pisidia, Paul and Barnabas came to Pamphylia and when they had preached the word in Perga, they went down to Attalia. From Attalia they sailed back to Antioch where they had been committed to the grace of God for the work they had now completed."** (Acts 14:24-26)

From the highlands of Derbe, Lystra, Iconium and Pisidian Antioch Paul and Barnabas hiked down through the hills back to the seacoast, a journey of more than 150 miles.

It was here they had first landed coming from Cyprus Island, several months ago, remember? It was here John Mark had left them to return to Jerusalem. Can you see Paul and Barnabas sitting under a tree reminiscing about John Mark's departure from them and all that he had missed in their past several months of adventure? *True to form Paul was not about to simply pass through this town without proclaiming the Gospel of Jesus here and while we have no report of specific results, we can be sure the Gospel was clearly heard in Perga by many, many people!*

Looking out over the Mediterranean Sea from Perga Paul and Barnabas had a decision to make. Return to Cyprus Island and revisit Mr. Sergius Paulus the proconsul and then the various towns where they had presented the Gospel on Cyprus and then head back to Syrian Antioch from Cyprus OR...? Perhaps it was their anxious desire to get back to Antioch and report with great exuberance all that Jesus had done on this first missionary trip? Perhaps it was the first sailing ship available back to the Syrian mainland, and it was not going through Cyprus but directly to Seleucia and nearby Antioch? *Perhaps it was a clear leading of the Holy Spirit.* However, it happened, I want to leave you today standing on the deck of a sailing ship with passengers and lots of cargo, heading east with full sail, back home to where this adventure began. Oh, it shouldn't be hard for us to imagine the conversations Paul and Barnabas had as they reflected on all they had experienced in each city. I wonder too, if by the time they reached Seleucia and disembarked, if there were any passengers on that ship who had NOT heard a full, clear presentation of the Gospel from Paul?

So, let's stand on the deck and watch the waves, the billowing sails, and the coastline of Turkey disappearing over the horizon behind us. Let's listen in as Paul and Barnabas tell each other story after story of the remarkable spiritual adventure they have been on, led by the Holy Spirit? *May I ask... looking back over the past year or so of your life, what has been YOUR spiritual adventure?* What do you have today to celebrate? How has the Holy Spirit been working to refine you? What has Jesus accomplished through you for God's glory this past year wherever you live in the world? And tomorrow we'll walk off this ship with Paul and Barnabas to a grand reunion and celebration in Syrian Antioch!!

Today's Scripture is Acts 14:21-26.