

Sunday, August 27 ,2023 *“Paul’s Journeys Part1”*

Acts 9: 1-9 Acts 13:4-14:26 and Acts 15:36-18:22

What is a journey? In modern English, a journey refers to a trip without regard to the amount of time it takes. The verb to journey developed from the noun and it is traveling that is completed in one day. Often when takes a journey they record what they experience in a journal which highlights the events of each and every day. Journeys are something we each have and experience but when we look at our modern ideas of travelling it is where one goes and what one might accomplish doing something significant.

Saul/ Paul is known for his missionary journeys. That is, Paul did not just stay in one area where Jesus walked and talked. Paul was called by God’s Spirit to do a specific task as he was an instrument chosen by God to bring his name before Gentiles, kings, and the people of Israel. (Acts 9:15) But why Saul/Paul? Why did God choose him? Why did he experience such a conversion in faith that his life purpose changed?

Paul was at first the biggest threat to the church’s existence. He was a Greek speaking Jew from Asia Minor. His birthplace, Tarsus, was a major city in eastern Cilicia, a region that is part of the Roman province of Syria. Paul was a tent maker and could travel with few leather-working tools and set up shop anywhere. As an artisan he was known by many in his community but not of the elite. Two of the main cities of Syria, Damascus and Antioch, played a prominent part in his life and letters. He was the best Jew and Pharisee of his generation yet the least apostle of Jesus as he has stated in his letters. Any success he attributes to God.

Saul/Paul possibly believed that Jewish converts to the new movement of the Way were letting go of their Jewish law observances and that Jewish converts mingled too freely with Gentile convert. Whatever his reasons, Paul’s persecutions probably involved traveling from synagogue to synagogue and urging the punishment of Jews who accepted Jesus as the messiah. Disobedient members of synagogues were punished by some form of ostracism or by light flogging. Or even stoning as he had witnessed the stoning of Steven. Saul’s journeys prior to meeting Jesus involved rounding up converts who were not living as faithful Jewish people and taking them to Jerusalem for punishment.

But this soon changed. Jesus spoke to him and questioned his purpose of seeking Christians. Befriended by Ananias and other followers of Jesus, Paul learned more about Jesus' life, death and resurrection. He returned home and continued to find out more about God's Son until the time came when he was called to journey and to fulfill God's mission for his life.

During this period, in the Roman Empire, travel was fairly safe. Paul and his companions sometimes traveled by ship, but much of the time they walked, probably beside a donkey carrying tools, clothes, and perhaps some scrolls. Occasionally they had plenty, but often they were hungry, ill-clad, and cold often relying on the charity of their converts.

Paul and Silas and Timothy met many people as they shared Jesus' story. They faced restrictions by those in power. Also the Spirit of God diverted them. Eventually they arrived at Troas on the Aegean Sea. They eventually went to Philippi and stayed. During their time, Paul and Silas met a slave girl whose owners made money off of her because she was a fortune teller. Paul cast the demon out of her and they were taken to the magistrates as her owners lost income of the powers. There they were beaten and thrown in jail. While in prison, they prayed and sang hymns to God. An earthquake occurred which opened the doors and broke their chains. The jailer was afraid that all the prisoners would leave but they had not left. Paul proclaimed Jesus and they came to faith. It became known also that Paul and Silas were Roman citizens and the magistrates apologized for this.

Paul and the crew continued in their journey to Thessalonica where they received much negative feedback about their message from the Jews. This was not the case when they first went to Berea but later people from Thessalonica came and stirred up the people. Paul then went into Athens and preached using the thoughts of Greek philosophers and this is when some laughed but many believed and joined Paul.

They then went to Corinth, a natural funnel for traffic, as people travelled to and from all the Roman provinces along the northern shore of the Mediterranean. At Corinth Paul continued to spread the gospel to many new areas by preaching to sailors, traveling merchants, and others who passed through the city. In Corinth Paul literally could spread his gospel more efficiently by staying in one place. Initially, he probably intended to move westward from

Corinth as soon as a church was firmly established there, but after he arrived at Corinth, he seems to have decided that he could send the gospel on through others. Corinth was known for pagan practises, immorality, and questioning ways of worshipping other gods. Whether it was Greek gods, rituals or not living godly lives, Paul had an audience who sought direction in their lives. In Ephesus, Paul preached against the Artemis cult and magic, calling people to have faith and believe in God. He later claimed that he preached the gospel “from Jerusalem as far round as Illyricum”. Between Corinth and Ephesus their 2nd journey was extended about another year or so before they made their way back to Antioch.

While Paul and his crew travelled the emperors Tiberius, Caligula and Claudius reigned. But what occurred and caused much concerns for Paul as he met and taught people was whether Gentiles needed to keep the Jewish law in order to be saved. This included the rite of circumcision. This question was pondered and when The Council of Jerusalem met they decided that all were saved by faith. However they were also cautioned to avoid certain behaviours which would be offensive to their Jewish brothers and sisters. This aided in the mission journey of Paul and more people believed and lived.

Paul’s first two journeys was to establish churches with Jesus as the one who saved him and could save others. The message did not change as they travelled. People believed and churches were established. Not all the answers about what is right in practise were known but the churches were kept up to date with correspondence from Paul as to what they needed to do.

What Paul encountered in the cities differed by location and the influences of other traditions and practises of people—magic, Greek gods, unknown rituals and yet the people were search for something in their lives that had meaning. The people Paul taught were regular people—people who went to the synagogues, who prayed, who lived and loved God. Or they were people who did not know God but had been raised with other traditions.

The 1st Century church has been compared by many people to what is happening today in the 21st Century church. There are many influences and practises but what is amazing is that

what people are seeking now is what people were searching for then. Hope. Community and connections.

Paul's mission was taking the good news of salvation to the ends of the earth and to preach the good news to the Gentiles. It was first for the Jews the original recipients of the promise so in every town Paul preached in the synagogues. Not everyone was open to receive this message. But what occurred was that a small number of Jews would believe and a larger number of Gentile God-fearers would worship together. If Paul got expelled from the synagogue he would move to the town square and then preach there. House churches were started. When these Christ followers worshiped together, they would share the good news with others. Paul would move on to the next town.

Paul believed that his work was not completed when he left Ephesus. He needed to follow up and see the people in the churches now established. There were many questions about practice and exclusion of ideas. And this is when Paul unable to go and be with the people all of the time, would write letters to the churches. Letters of encouragement, correction and instruction; letters emphasizing Jesus as Lord and the need to keep Him first.

Paul returned to Antioch and next week we will look at his third and fourth journeys. But for us in this moment—where are you on your life's journey? Do you know your mission as an individual working and serving Christ? Do you see yourself changing as you grow in faith and understanding? These are questions of faith, yes but they are also questions and concerns which need to be raised in prayer by you as individuals and as people of hope.

Paul's journeys were his; what about your journey? Where are you as you speak to others about your faith in Jesus Christ?

Let us pray

O God we pray that your Spirit would bless us as we journey this day. We are people who have gathered as a church family but are all at different times and places as we walk your way. Bless us O God and guide us on our journeys. Speak to us we pray SILENCE Amen.

