TROUBLE AND THE JOY OF RESTORATION
ACTS 12:1-10; 13:1-13, 38,39, 44,52; 14:1-4
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It seems like a long time since we've been looking at the emerging Church in Acts. The Church had been stretching out further and further. Stephen, one of the seven Greek Jews chosen to serve the needs of the Grecian Jews—particularly the widows because they were being neglected in the weekly alms distributed by the synagogue and by individual Jews—had a worldwide view of salvation by Christ. He was boldly outspoken about it and it cost him his life. But the persecution that broke out the day he was stoned to death scattered followers of The Way and the Word was preached in Samaria, it was taken to Ethiopia by a royal official, and was established in Lebanon. Saul, the Christian-stalker, headed there, to Damascus, to wipe out Christ followers. But on the way he had his well-known conversion, when he was intercepted and rendered temporarily blind by Jesus. Subsequently, he went to Arabia where, for a time, God prepared him for the task of calling Gentiles to Christ. He preached the Gospel in Damascus for three years before going to Jerusalem.

For the last two weeks of our journey, we saw Cornelius and Peter break the strangle hold that "God's Chosen People" had on Christianity. God spoke to both of them—Cornelius a Gentile and of course Peter a Jew and a disciple/apostle—in distinct visions that resulted in Peter entering a Gentile home and telling the Gospel message to Cornelius, along with his family and friends. The Gospel was now on the move! And this is where reading Acts becomes dizzying. King Herod—no, not the Herod in the Christmas story—this is Herod Agrippa—whose ancestry traced back to the Maccabees. Because he wanted to gain popular favour with the Jewish people, he put Peter in jail, and this time he was guarded by sixteen soldiers—four squads. Peter was put in prison, but the Church was earnestly praying to God for him, and voila, an angel of the Lord woke him urgently, his chains fell off his wrists; the angel told him to get dressed and led him out of the prison. Comically, when he arrived at the house of John Mark, prayer central, Rhoda, a servant girl, overjoyed at hearing Peter's voice, returned to her group without letting Peter in. Sixteen soldiers were executed for dereliction of duty. So the miraculous continues.

Paul's first missionary trip is outlined in chapter thirteen and fourteen—to Cyprus (Salamis and Paphos), Pisidian Antioch, Iconium, Lystra, Derbe, back to Lystra, Iconium and Pisidia, Pamphylia, (Perga, Attalia), then via Seleucia to Antioch—not by planes, trains or automobiles! A three year journey. Think about how amazing that is. Pisidian Antioch was on a plain 3,600 feet up. This wasn't like travelling across the prairies. Paul had to go through/over mountains to get there.

It's too much today to read all of chapter twelve, thirteen and fourteen, but I encourage you to read all of that when you have a chance today/this week. If you're a history buff, you could camp there for a long time, but I'll pass that by and look the spiritual side of what was happening. Chapter thirteen opens with prophets and teachers gathered at Antioch

who were worshiping and fasting. The Holy Spirit set apart Saul and Barnabas; the prophets and teachers placed their hands on them and sent them off.

Today we do the same thing. When David heads to Africa, when Guensen and Claudia were here, when Pavlo and his family were here, we lay hands on them. It is a way of affirming God commissioning them to go, share and live the Gospel. We who remain behind have an equally important role—to support them in prayer and finance (as we're able). Many have an understanding about mission that you should only go if you're called. Tony Campolo puts it the other way around: He says unless you are called to stay—go. But to the point of this passage, those who go are blessed and are to go with the whole-hearted endorsement of the church.

Well, they weren't far out of the gate when they encountered Elymas the sorcerer (13:6-12), who tried to turn the proconsul, Sergius Paulus, who wanted to hear the word of God, from the faith. Here's where Saul—now also is called Paul—so it wasn't like when Jacob was given a new name by God and was called Israel—it was common at that time: most Jews had a Jewish name and a wider circle Greek name. But this name change parallels the launch of Paul's mission to the Gentiles. But back to the point: each of us is called by God. It is important to listen for that call and to be obedient to it when you "hear it". In saying that, it means that each of us is to live a life of significance. Each of us is to live a life worthy of our calling, not to waste it away 1 day at a time.

Some will say, "But I haven't heard where God is leading me. That may be quite true. But don't despair. There's a balance here between listening attentively to God's leading and sitting on your hands doing nothing. There comes a time when you can't just idle your jets indefinitely. Prayerfully move where you believe God wants you to go, because either He will bless it or make it clear that another course is what He desires. God can hit a moving target!

When Paul and Barnabas got to Pisidian Antioch the synagogue rulers sent word to them that if they had a message of encouragement for the people, please speak (13:15). Too often today we discourage people from expressing their spiritual awakenings. When we go to Bible studies, there's an expectation that pretty much the leader is the voice to be listened to. But, if we've truly invited the Holy Spirit to lead us, what we may have assumed to be the least likely source of wisdom can speak deeply into our lives with great insight.

After Paul and Barnabas had spoken, the following week almost the whole city gathered to hear the word of the Lord (13:44). May God grant listening hearts among those who are yet strangers to God's grace! Keep us persistent, undeterred and not discouraged.

The other aspect here is once you're on the move for God, you will become a target for the evil one. You're going to face opposition. Some who heard Paul and Barnabas speak were jealous and talked abusively against what they were saying (13:45). So, with that rejection, they turned to the Gentiles (13:48)—*"When the Gentiles heard this they were glad and honoured the word of the Lord; and all who were appointed for eternal life believed."* You have been

appointed for eternal life. You cannot lose it. But don't confuse what I'm saying. There are lots of ho-hum ways to spend your life. Yet every one of us is called to do our best and to intentionally move with God and for God. Expect it. In fact, may I say, enjoy it.

Paul and Barnabas were expelled from their region in Pisidian Antioch. So they shook the dust from their feet in protest against them and went to Iconium. And the disciples were filled with joy and with the Holy Spirit. (13:50-52)

Rejection of what you say may well be a sign that you've moved to do the Lord's will, not just agreed with it. You will always meet those oppose you/the message of the Gospel, but you will also find fertile ground. So do not despair. Move to where the soil is fertile, but understand that the tough soil, may yet be tilled fruitfully.

I had a recent encounter with this. A colleague quite unjustly was all over me about what I was believed to have done. It was mean-spirited, it was aggressive, it was factually incorrect. This colleague greeted me all smiles, just this past week, ready to move right past the story. I said, we have some unfinished business here. The colleague wanted to skirt around it and not accept accountability for what was said. Again, I said, we have unfinished business and we won't move forward until it's addressed. That would be to pass it off without the other person growing in grace from it. This wasn't being hard-hearted. Of course I will forgive; in fact, I have already, but the other needs to know clearly the damage caused. In the end, grace will prevail.

Paul was stoned in Lystra due to trouble-makers following he and Barnabas from Pisidian Antioch and Iconium. They dragged him outside the city, thinking he was dead,
"but after the disciples gathered around him, he got up… and went back into the city. They preached the good news in that city and won a large number of disciples…We must go through many hardships to enter the kingdom of God." (15:19-22)

Get back in the ring. Get up one more time than you're knocked down. It takes courage to be a Christian. But you are never a one-man-band; you are never alone. Jesus didn't come to make life easy; He came to make each of us great. He also built us to be a fellowship; not only are we never alone because God is always with us: neither are we alone because we have the fellowship of the Church. In that spirit, let's gather around the table, with great gratitude and humility for what Christ has done for us!

The door of faith had now opened wide to the Gentiles. Praise God! We don't face the kind of persecution here that puts our lives in peril. But we can be cruelly ostracized.