

RETURNING TO THE SCENE

ACTS 14:21-28 JUNE 10, 2020

You've probably heard about the tendency of certain criminals to return to the scene of their crimes. Arsonists, in particular, have been found to hang around to watch their work. One study showed that 28% never left the scene. Of those who *did* leave, 59% came back. Some immediately, some about a half hour later, some the next day.¹ Which just goes to show you - if you're hanging around a building that's on fire, you *might* be considered a suspect.

Now, we know that Paul was no arsonist, but he *had* started a fire. He was no criminal, but he had certainly been treated like one. After a long trip through across the sea and through the Galatian territory, being led by the Holy Spirit, he realizes the mission is coming to a close. But then something remarkable happens: He and Barnabas turn around and head *back* through the very places where they had barely escaped with their lives. To Antioch of Pisida, where they had been run out of town. To Iconium, where there had been a plot to murder them. To Lystra, where Paul actually *was* murdered. There was no long interval of years in-between these visits. Maybe a few weeks or months. But here we see how the power of God and the *leading* of God can equip a Christian to walk in great courage. It's a power that drives out fear.

Something else is worth noting. Bible Commentator Ivor Powell prods us to look at that map that most of us have in the back of our Bibles, which show the route of Paul's 3 missionary journeys. In this case, looking at his first trip, notice the road *not* taken. When our text opens, Paul is in Derbe. Look a little to the east and what do you see? You'll see Tarsus, Paul's town. Probably full of family and friends. Look a little east of that and you'll see Antioch of Syria. Paul's *new* home, full of his family in the faith. But now, look at Paul's trip "home." He goes back (mostly) the way he came so that he could fan the flame of faith that he helped kindle in all those places.

Or, we might say he was going back to tend to the little saplings that had been planted. We talk about "church planting." Your Bible may even have that as a heading over our verses tonight. Some tender, vulnerable young churches had been started through Paul's ministry and he felt compelled to go and cultivate them, strengthen them, help them in their infancy.

Those of you who garden know how much care and attention and effort it takes to properly develop plants. It takes time. Time was not something Paul had a lot of on this particular trip. Good gardening also requires light and soil and some other supplies. Paul was also disadvantaged here. Not only were most of these believers living among hostile opponents of the Gospel, they also had no written New Testament. Some of them probably didn't even have the written *Old* Testament. These were churches filled with baby Christians, now tasked with becoming the Body of Christ and taking up the Great Commission themselves.

What do you do in a situation like that? And, secondly, when you've been called to a specific ministry and you've dedicated your life to it and then it comes to an end...what then? These are questions that churches and Christians still face today. Some answers are on display for us in our text. We begin in verse 21.

Acts 14:21 - 21 After they had preached the gospel in that town [Derbe] and made many disciples, they returned to Lystra, to Iconium, and to Antioch,

¹ William G. Bradshaw, Timothy G. Huff *Arsonists in California and New York: A Tentative Look*

Luke doesn't give us much detail in reporting on this part of the trip, but we know it was an effective time. We're told that they made *many* disciples in Derbe. We also know that a man named Gaius was converted there, who later became a traveling companion of Paul's. He would suffer persecution in Ephesus. But he would also be with Paul when he wrote Romans, acting as a host to the apostle and the whole church.²

We note that the verse says they preached *and* made many disciples. The object of each is the same, and preaching is required first so that people might *begin* the life of discipleship. But it's good for us to remember that our responsibility is to go and *make disciples*. That can't be done without preaching, and so, the preaching of the Gospel must be primary and persistent. But if there was nothing for us to do beyond the proclamation of the Gospel, then most Christians could retire until the rapture. Because now we have radio and television and cheap printing and the internet. The Gospel is being proclaimed, in a general sense, 24 hours a day, all around the world. But the assignment given to us is to go and *make disciples*. That means we're to go and teach people how to *walk* with God. It means we have to *keep* proclaiming God's word and showing one another how to apply it. It means we join together and go out fishing for men and women who are still lost in sin.

The way Paul made disciples was by establishing local churches. This was, obviously, the leading of the Holy Spirit, but we see him doing it on this trip. He'd go to a place and preach the Good News of Jesus Christ. People would be born again and then Paul would have them form a local church. A group of people, deeply connected by the love of God and the work of the Holy Spirit. And, together they would grow and develop and continue the transforming work of Christ in their city.

As we've seen, usually not long after Paul organized a church in a town, he'd get kicked out by unbelievers. But now, he decides to go *back*. Human reasoning would call this irresponsible. Paul saw it as necessary. What that shows us is that, sometimes, when we're doing God's work, we're going to have to ignore *danger* as a factor. If Paul would have factored "danger" into his equation, he'd head east to Tarsus, not west, back to Lystra. But this wasn't a man who was led by human reasoning. He was led by the Spirit and compelled by the love he had in his heart for people in need.

I'd encourage us, as individuals and a local church, to pray to God to give us an expanding love, not only for people in general, but a burden for some *specific* people that He would use us to minister to.

Acts 14:22 - [He went] ²² **strengthening the disciples by encouraging them to continue in the faith and by telling them, "It is necessary to go through many hardships to enter the kingdom of God."**

Interesting way to encourage people. We're used to a...more syrupy form of encouragement.

In *The Lego Movie*, when the dad realizes that the villain is patterned after him, he's hurt and demoralized, so he asks the son what the good guy would say to encourage and help the bad guy not be bad anymore, the speech goes like this: "You are the most talented, most interesting, and most extraordinary person in the universe. And you are capable of amazing things, because *YOU* are the special!" Hey that makes you feel good.

² Romans 16:23

Not Paul. Here's what he says to these fledgling believers: "It is *necessary* to go through many hardships to enter the kingdom of God." Wow. He didn't say that because he was jaded or because he had been dealt a particularly rough set of ministry cards. He said it because it's true. It was true for them, it's true for us. But why is it that we must go through many hardships or pass through many troubles on our way to our glorious future in heaven?

There are a quite a few reasons given in the New Testament. But, fundamentally we remember that we live out this life in a fallen world, ruled by the enemy of God, who wants to extinguish God's light.

Well then, why doesn't God just *exempt* His people from suffering the way He did with some of the plagues in Egypt? The land of Goshen wasn't subject to all those terrible things. Sometimes they had a supernatural shield blocking any ill effects.

God's Word explains that suffering, though not caused by God, is useful in our development and sanctification. It can act as a refining work, purifying and strengthening us. Making us more able to do greater spiritual work. It can be used to prepare us to help others. It can be used to show God's might and His glory.

We understand that strain and pressure and hardship can lead to an accomplishment that couldn't have been achieved otherwise. You're not going to beat Mario Brothers without jumping all the hurdles, smashing all the koopa troopas, and dodging fireballs. Or, here's a more serious example: If you want to make a Marine, you can't do so just by saying to a random person on the street: You're a Marine! But take that same person off the street, put them through the rigor of training, the challenges of the crucible, and they come out as something they weren't before.

Paul explained to these believes that, to operate as Christians behind enemy lines, they would need strengthening and equipment. He gave them supports to be able to continue living the Christian life. How? By continuing in the faith. It's said quickly here, fleshed out more in passages like Colossians 1:23, where we learn that continuing in the faith means to believe the truth and stand firmly in it. To not drift away from the teach of Scripture. To not grow weary in doing good. And to rely on the grace of God, day by day. As each morning dawns, we rise to exercise our faith as *active* disciples.

Acts 14:23 - ²³When they had appointed elders for them in every church and prayed with fasting, they committed them to the Lord in whom they had believed.

For individual Christians to grow and be disciplined they needed a local church. It was true then, it's still true today. Paul believed in the local church. Not just a general idea that I, individually, am part of Christ's Body universal. *We are*, individually members of Christ's Body. But Paul, with what little time he had, wanted these young Christians to know that they needed a vibrant, organized, *local* congregation, with leaders and responsibilities and a unified devotion to the Lord. He and Barnabas took this organization process seriously. They prayed and fasted. Sometimes, in other places, Paul would *leave* one of his companions (like Titus or Timothy) to pastor in a place where, apparently, there wasn't someone else ready to take it on.

Having established an organized fellowship, he "committed them to the Lord." There's a sweetness embedded here. Another way to say it is that he "turned them over to the care of the Lord." And what a tender care it is. Albert Barnes writes: "They were feeble, inexperienced, and exposed to dangers; but in [the Lord's] hands they were safe."³

³ Albert Barnes *Notes On The Whole Bible*

From Paul's perspective there's also a loving affection in the words. The term is one that can "imply the confiding trust of one who commits what is very precious to him to the keeping of another."⁴

The verse closes by saying that it was in *Christ* whom they had believed. Not a man. Not a method. Not a brand or a slogan. The Lord Jesus was their object and focus, their Friend and Shepherd.

This scene also demonstrates that when Paul set up a church, it was meant to function in an independent, self-sufficient, self-governing way. Of course, there was a brotherhood among the churches. We've already seen that when those in Antioch sent aid to those in Judea. And, next up, we'll see the Jerusalem Council, which had implications for all believers, but as a congregation, they were localized.

And that makes perfect sense. Because if we compare Derbe to Lystra or Antioch to Jerusalem, there are completely different peoples and circumstances in each place. All are under the same Lord, all have the same ultimate goals and values. But the function, the operation, the emphasis and the forms are going to vary place to place, just like your hand compared to your stomach.

Acts 14:24-25 - ²⁴They passed through Pisidia and came to Pamphylia. ²⁵After they had spoken the word in Perga, they went down to Attalia.

Very little is reported here, although I'm sure a lot happened. We know that there had been some folks from Pamphylia at Pentecost back in Acts 2. Whether they had returned or not, we can't say.

Acts 14:26 - ²⁶From there they sailed back to Antioch where they had been commended to the grace of God for the work they had now completed.

On the trip back Paul and Barnabas bypassed Cyprus. We don't know why. It's altogether possible that on this sea voyage from Attalia to Antioch they experienced one of the shipwrecks we know about in Paul's life. One is at the *end* of Acts, but there were at least 3 others.

But now, after around 2 years, they're finally back at home with their friends and brothers in Antioch, who had sent them out on this trip. We're reminded here they had been commended to the grace of God. Paul and Barnabas had been commended to *go*, the believers in the Galatians churches were commended to *stay*. God has a lot of different kinds of work for his people. And that is a wonderful thing. Either way, they were commended to the loving grace of God.

But, wait a minute! Think back on what we've been reading. Apparently God's "grace" for Paul included beatings and running for his life and *being killed!* That's true. That was the job. That was the work he had been set apart for.

Years ago, the television show *Dirty Jobs* was a big hit. I remember watching it sometimes and, while being horrified at some of the incredible things people do, I was at the same time glad that *someone* was willing to do the work. Paul was willing, and for that we are thankful.

But now, we're told, the work was "completed." That's an interesting thing to say. Weren't there more people in Galatia? Weren't there more towns without churches. Yes there were. But, as far as God was concerned, the specific assignment that He had set apart Paul and Barnabas for back in

⁴ *Ellicott's Commentary For English Readers*

Acts 13:2 was over. That particular ministry was done. Paul *could've* stayed or pressed on to other cities, but it wouldn't have been the Lord's leading.

Sometimes particular ministries come to an end. And that's ok. It doesn't mean we have failed or God has failed. Later, Paul will get a sequel to the trip. The Lord will lead him to head back to some of these places. And then, some places Paul really *wanted* to go to, God would say, "No. You may not." But the example here, *again*, shows how much we need to be sensitive to the leading of the Holy Spirit. Not just the leading to *start* something, but also the leading of when to *stop* something.

Of course, even though this mission was over, Paul wasn't done. He didn't hang up his spurs. He simply started another chapter of ministry, once again in the calm and relief of Antioch.

Acts 14:27 - ²⁷ After they arrived and gathered the church together, they reported everything God had done with them and that he had opened the door of faith to the Gentiles.

Open door is a term you've probably heard in Christian circles. It was a phrase Paul would use a number of times, he seemed to like it. Jesus seemed to like it too, He used it in one of *His* letters in The Revelation. There are different ways the image is used. Here it's that the door of faith was open to the Gentiles. The door to God's house was open. Simultaneously, we know that God Himself had left heaven to knock on the door of the hearts of each man and woman, in hopes that they would open up their own doors and invite Him in.

What doors are open for us as Christians in Hanford? Using Antioch as an example, I think we can learn that by talking to one another about the things God has done for us, we might discover what doors have opened before us as a local fellowship of believers in this time and place.

There's a sweet wording there in verse 27: They reported everything God had done *with* them. Not what they had done *for* God, but what they did together, as God walked with them as a Friend and Guide and Sustainer. We can also think of it as how they had been used by the Lord for glorious purposes. He, taking imperfect human vessels, and doing eternal work with them. That's what the Lord wants to do with us, too. He wants to do it with us, together, in intimate communion, as we trust Him and operate in grace.

Acts 14:28 - ²⁸ And they spent a considerable time with the disciples.

It's good to see that Paul wasn't discontent. He wasn't guided by wanderlust. "Let's just do something new and exciting." He was content to be on the field or back at home base. And he made himself a faithful servant in each setting. He was as ministry minded in Antioch of Syria *or* Antioch of Pisidia. That is an admirable maturity. Because there's always something *else* we could be focused on, some potential, some "one-day," but, at the same time, there are opportunities and lives right in front of us that we can spend ourselves in.

There's always plenty of gardening to do in God's vineyard. It can be done when circumstances are stacked against us or if they're favorable. It can be done whether we're among friends or strangers. It can be done when we find ourselves in danger or in safety. Cozy at home or far away. Wherever God has led us, we can cultivate His work in our own lives and in those around us. We can fan the flame and be used for something special as we continue in the faith, with one another in the local church, finding open doors and passing through them.