

“Hit the Road”

Life is a Highway, Read the Map – part #4

Acts 13:1-12

This is the fourth week of our series, “Life is a Highway: Read the Map.” Paper maps are rare these days. We used to travel exclusively with them, before we had GPS and smartphones. One thing I learned: you have to know how to read a map for it to be useful. Even if you have a map in your car, if you don’t use it or even understand it, you will get lost!

God has also given us a map for life. The Bible gives us direction and tells us about our origin and how others have negotiated life before us – some following God, and others not. 2nd Timothy 3:16-17 says that “All scripture is God-breathed and is useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness, so that the servant of God may be thoroughly equipped for every good work.” Today I want to examine a bit from the life of the man who wrote those verses, the Apostle Paul.

What was the longest road trip you have ever taken? I have flown on some pretty long trips to Alaska, Hawaii, and Western Europe, but the longest road trip I have ever personally driven was to Maine one summer in college. I went through Port Huron, Niagara Falls, and Boston, and returned through Philadelphia and Chicago. It was a total of 2,800 miles, and according to Google maps, it included 42 hours of actual driving time.

That’s not bad, but the Apostle Paul did not have a car, let alone GPS. He traveled by walking and sailing. Scholars estimate that Paul traveled over 10,000 miles in his lifetime.¹ (Show the Google maps version of four of Paul’s trips.) I

¹ <https://www.openbible.info/blog/2012/07/calculating-the-time-and-cost-of-pauls-missionary-journeys/>

think I may have walked 20 miles in one day at most; I can't imagine that much traveling. What motivated Paul to make these amazing trips? That is the question I want us to consider as we read this passage in Acts 13.

Scripture Reading, Acts 13:1-12

There are a few basic facts to know about the Apostle Paul. First of all, his Jewish name is Saul, so in the book of Acts, you will find both names. He was an extremely religious Jewish teacher, who actually persecuted Christians. Our first introduction to Saul is in Acts 7:58, where he witnesses the martyrdom of Stephen. Immediately after Stephen's death, the Bible says, "Saul began to destroy the church. Going from house to house, he dragged off both men and women and put them in prison." Saul hated Christians because he thought they were destroying Judaism. He believed he was actually doing God's will. But on his way to Damascus to arrest more Christians, Jesus appeared to Saul and changed his life. (Acts 9.) After being healed of temporary blindness and being baptized, Saul became a missionary for Christ, preaching and proclaiming the gospel of the resurrected Jesus. I think Saul had the most amazing life-transformation in the entire Bible.

What we have in Acts 13 is the very first story of Saul being sent out to other towns to share the gospel. The first thing we read is that there were many teachers and prophets in the church in Antioch, in modern-day Syria. Saul was just one of them. But this church took their faith seriously. They gathered to worship, pray, and fast – that is, abstain from food. During this time, the Holy Spirit spoke and designated Saul and Barnabas to be set apart for a special mission.

I admit, I would like to think that God uses me for a special mission. But often times I miss what the book of Acts is saying. To be used by God takes time and prayer. It is serious work. This idea to send missionaries wasn't something the disciples heard at a conference, or read in a book, or heard some other church somewhere was doing. The Holy Spirit provided the vision, through prayer and fasting, through worship that came with great sacrifice of time and personal preference. When the church was willing to fully submit themselves to God's will in waiting, in prayer, and in fasting, then the Holy Spirit could tell them what to do. The same holds true today. We won't see any “Pauls” coming out of our local churches until we show the same conviction to waiting, prayer, and fasting that they did.

Note this, too. It was not some decision or vote of the board of directors of the church in Antioch that gave Saul and Barnabas permission to go. It was the Holy Spirit alone. The rest of the leadership team simply obeyed the calling.

So where did Saul go on his first journey? (Picture.) He and Barnabas went by boat to Cyprus, walked across the island, then took another boat north towards modern-day Turkey. Eventually, they backtracked, revisiting each community and new church they had planted along the way. His first trip covered over 1,500 miles.

This was no vacation. Besides the weariness of traveling, Saul and Barnabas encountered a lot of resistance when they spoke about Jesus. Being Jews, they first went to the synagogues where other Jews were worshipping. They started with their own people. Jesus was a Jew, after all. The trouble was that they encountered many Jews who thought this new version of faith, which they called

"The Way," was too heretical, too sacrilegious. In fact, many of the same objections the disciples experienced were the same as the ones Jesus faced.

Saul's first encounter on the island of Cyprus, in the town of Paphos, is indicative of how his future journeys will go. There they meet a man named Sergius Paulus, who is a Roman official, sort of like the township supervisor of the province. They also meet a man named Elymas, or Bar-Jesus, a magician and a Jew.

The tension is set from the beginning. Firstly, a Jew should know that Deuteronomy 18:9-14 strictly forbids the practice of sorcery. So this Elymas is a rebel himself, skilled at manipulating people with dark arts. Secondly, his double name is odd. Bar-Jesus means "Son of One who Saves." Almost sounds like he is the Jewish equivalent of a preacher's kid who chose an alternative lifestyle. Elymas immediately jumps in and starts an argument with Saul and Barnabas, trying to prevent his boss from hearing the gospel.

Hey, I like magicians. We had one come to Bellaire last year, Danny Hall, and his show was amazing. But Danny was honest that his show was merely illusion and sleight of hand. It was entertaining, not manipulating. Elymas, on the other hand, was clearly an evil man who used other people to get what he wanted.

This is where the story gets exciting, and a little weird, in my opinion. Saul looks Elymas in the eye and gets all "righteous" on him. Saul shouts, "You son of the devil, you enemy of all righteousness, full of all deceit and villainy, will you not stop making crooked the straight paths of the Lord?" Dang, them's fightin' words. Saul makes no attempt at diplomacy. Saul goes right for the throat, calls this

magician and charlatan out for who he is, and pronounces a curse of temporary blindness on him. Whoa. Fun stuff.

The author of Acts is making a bold statement from the beginning of Saul's journey. The whole story is ultimately a battle between good and evil, God and the devil, and it is best if you know what side you stand on. Saul did not make the man blind; he said, "The Lord's hand is against you." God does the action. Saul is just the instrument, the willing messenger.

Here's what I like most about this story. Sergius, the proconsul, is amazed, not by the miracle of tongue lashing Elymas just got, but, the scripture says, by "the teaching about the Lord."

Hold on a second. Is it not amazing that a person suddenly and with no explanation goes from being an arrogant charlatan to being blind? Yes. However, Sergius was more impressed by hearing the story of Jesus Christ than by the miracle he saw. Sure, the miracle made an impact. But the most important thing was the not the sign, it was learning about Jesus himself.

It doesn't matter how amazing you think your life is or is not. The same amazing truth that Paul preached throughout the Mediterranean is the truth we know today. Jesus Christ, the Son of the Living God, died and rose again, and by calling on his name, we can be saved. Look, Paul was an amazing man. Read the rest of his story. He gets shipwrecked, imprisoned, is nearly killed a dozen or more times, faces starvation and extreme forces of nature, and preaches until he is martyred, writing a third of our New Testament all the while.

Each person here is just as valuable to Jesus as Paul. We all have a road to walk. We all have people to reach with the same amazing gospel. The power of God is not the person; it is the Word we carry within us. Paul says in 2nd

Corinthians 4:7, “We have this treasure in jars of clay, to show that the surpassing power belongs to God and not to us.” We have it! Not just Paul, or Barnabas, or Peter, or the pope, or Rick Warren, or any religious giant you want to name. Not even just Pastor Eric. We are all frail, jars of clay that God uses to save others. That is the power of the gospel, and that is amazing!

So why don't our churches grow like Paul's? I think it is because we have become too willing to keep the map stuffed in the glovebox, keep our spiritual cars parked in the garage, and not answer God's invitation to hit the road. We don't have to travel thousands of miles to share Jesus with someone, but if that's your thing, go for it. There is a Chinese proverb: “a journey of a thousand miles begins with a single step.” Some times that first step is going to your neighbor, your coworker, your friend, your school, or your community center, and that step feels just as hard and heavy as starting a 2,000 mile journey. We must realize that the Holy Spirit calls all of us. If we pray, read the Bible, and fast, we will hear the Holy Spirit directing us. And when the Spirit says move, we must move.

As a ways of encouragement, let me share a story with you. A few weeks ago, I took the risk of simply inviting my next door neighbor to come over and let me share my story with him. I told him about God's love, the story of creation, Adam and Eve, and Jesus and the cross. I told him about my life, and how I became a pastor. I told him about sin and grace, forgiveness and purpose, and how I believe the invitation to trust Jesus is for everyone. And then I said, “You are the son of the devil, and you will be blind!” No, just kidding. I asked, “Do you have any questions?” I let God's Word do the work; I was just the messenger. Now, I knew I had to provide the message in a form that could be received. I

coached the message in his language, in terms I thought he would understand, but the point is, I shared the message as the Spirit led me.

It is a blessing to be used by God. Paul knew this, and we know it, too, when we respond in faithfulness to the Holy Spirit. Let God use you as his messenger, and don't worry about the getting it perfect the first time. Paul experienced ups and downs on his journeys, but the Holy Spirit always provided everything he needed. It will be the same way with you, as well, if you obey the Spirit and hit the road.

Memory Verse:

“And how can they believe in the one of whom they have not heard? And how can they hear without someone preaching to them?” - Romans 10:14

Reflection Questions:

1. What is the most difficult journey you have ever made?
2. How often do you pray, worship, and fast?
3. To what lengths would you go to see your friends and family saved by Christ?
4. What scares you the most about sharing the gospel?
5. How can the church help and encourage you to share your faith?