

VIII. The Revisitation of the Churches. Acts 14:21b-24.

One would think that Paul would have returned to his home city, Tarsus, after the happenings at Lystra, and all the opposition he had encountered. From Derbe, where he was at the time, there was a main highway that passed through the Tarsus mountain range, and which led directly to the city itself. And then, it would have been but a simple boat trip back to Antioch in Syria, his missionary headquarters.

But no, Paul had other plans. He chose the harder task of returning to those very centers where he had so recently preached the Word of God. In other words, he would retrace his steps, and cover the same identical ground he had just passed over; and he would do this in spite of the way he had been maligned and mistreated.

From Derbe they deliberately retraced their course and went in turn to Lystra where Paul had been stoned, to Iconium where an assault upon them had been planned and to Antioch from which they were expelled. In each of these places their ministry abruptly terminated and they had left their converts not merely discouraged but instructed and unconsolidated; so, there was danger of their apostatizing. Let us observe some things in connection with the places to which they returned.

1. The Place of Beating--Lystra.

This was the place where Paul suffered more keenly than in any in which he had labored for his blessed Lord. He would return to show them there, that although in their hatred they had tried to kill him, he still had a strong and genuine love for them in his heart. Ordinarily, we avoid returning to places where we have been ill-treated, or where, possibly, we have undergone a long illness. We endeavor to try to forget the unpleasantness of life by the process of sublimation. That is the human reaction, but Paul here emphasizes the divine aspect of things. Like his Lord, and dying Stephen, he would freely forgive all his enemies regardless of their attitude toward him.

Can you imagine their amazement as news got around that the very one whom they had stoned to death was back in town! Perhaps many through this means experienced a change of attitude toward him, but not particularly toward the Master. Doubtless, while Paul was in their midst, he preached the Word. That is the very purpose which drove him back there. Think of the feelings and reactions of his auditors as they witnessed this demonstration--a man whom they thought had been stoned to death was speaking to them. They had no difficulty in recognizing him. He was the same as ever, apart from the lacerations and freshly-inflicted bruises upon his face, put there doubtless by the cruel hands of some of those present in his audience.

2. The Place of Banishment--Iconium.

The elite of the town were responsible for his having been cast out of their borders: the religious women on the one hand and the fathers of the city on the other. But back of this action, of course, were the unbelieving and trouble-making Jews. They were the ones who provoked the better class to oust Paul and his fellow laborers. We read "they expelled them out of their coasts." These missionaries of the Cross very likely became highly indignant, because of this humiliation heaped upon them, and so we read that as they left the ungrateful city--"they shook off the dust of their feet against them."

For the time being, at least, they became embittered. As they went out of Iconium, they very probably said: "Goodbye, forever." But, since Paul was to see things in their true perspective, he gladly returned to this city once more. It certainly took a lot of the grace of God for him to go back and face those people. Here is an important lesson for us: never leave an individual or a situation in worse

condition than you found him or it. Leave the way open for either you or someone else to return later to finish the task.

3. The Place of Blessing--Antioch.

It was from Antioch they went forth, and to this city they now returned. They had been sent forth by the Holy Spirit, and with the blessing of the church there. During those intervening months the saints in Antioch followed Paul and his company in fervent prayer. Although they could not go in person, they could and did go with them in prayer. It was only natural that they eagerly awaited the return of the missionaries, because they wanted to hear of what the Lord had accomplished through their efforts.

The mission of these missionaries was threefold.

(1) To confirm Christians.

"Confirming the souls of the disciples." "To confirm" simply means to "strengthen." Upon their return to Lystra, they gathered the saints together and spoke to them "to the end that they might be established" in the faith. Paul wanted those who had taken Christ as their Saviour to acknowledge and enthrone Him as the Lord of their lives. Paul was anxious to build them up in the most holy faith. To this end, he fed them the meat of the Word and not simply the milk, as he had done on his first visit. All of those who are won to an acceptance of Christ as a Saviour need to be strengthened in the faith and in the Word.

(2) To exhort to constancy.

"And exhorting them to continue in the faith, and that we must through much tribulation enter into the Kingdom of God." Paul was a mighty pleader as well as a mighty preacher, and this should be the aspiration of every true servant of God. A man may preach from his head, but he can plead only from the heart.

(3) To organize churches.

"And when they had ordained them elders in every church, and had prayed with fasting, they commended them to the Lord, on whom they believed." After they had prayed and fasted, they selected elders by the show of hands. It is noteworthy that they agonized before they organized.

Their work in each city was inspiring and solemn; they gave stability to the souls of the learners, exhorted them to abide in the faith, made it clear that entering into God's kingdom is necessarily attended by persecution, which we must be prepared to endure, designated for them presbyters or elders in every church, so that they would have the needful leadership, held a season of prayer and fasting in which all were committed to the keeping of the Lord.

IX. Their Preaching in Perga. Acts 14:25.

They "spoke the word in Perga." This was done in their informal way. There is no mention of there having been any preaching there on their outward journey.

X. Their Return to Antioch. Acts 14:26-28.

They gathered together the church members and made a report of their work. "They rehearsed all that God had done with them, and how He had opened the door of faith unto the Gentiles." They had a wonderful story to tell. During the eighteen months they were away they had completed the work to which they had been committed. It was not

exactly as they had hoped because the Jews had not responded to their messages as they had wished. But the Gentiles had listened with open minds and hearts. "God had opened a door of faith unto the Gentiles, which would never be closed again."

This Gentile church heard the report of God's grace and power from the missionaries with great satisfaction. Their report is unique in its omission of the pronouns "I" and "we." They did not tell what all they had done for God, and how much they had endured for the cause of Christ, but they rehearsed what God had done with them and through them. They had a blessed time together. Their hearts were thrilled and they rejoiced with each other. These faithful and heroic missionaries made a long sojourn among their friends in Antioch, perhaps two years.