

Northwest Community Evangelical Free Church

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Dave Smith

Sermon manuscript

Series: Next!

(studies in the book of Acts)

The Great Commission - Our Map and Compass

(Acts 13:13--14:28)

Study #17

Introduction: Lost, but making great time...

I begin this morning with one more story from my recently completed trip to the Weminuche Wilderness in Colorado.

We had eaten breakfast and broken camp on the third day of our trek. It was a slightly overcast morning and we were on our way down to a place called Squaw Pass, a low spot on the Continental Divide Trail.

We had been on the trail for a couple of hours when we saw a lone hiker coming our way. The Weminuche is a pretty remote area and you don't see too many people when you are there. When you do meet up with someone, you chat.

This guy told us about his travels, which had been considerable.

He had been on the trail for sixty seven days. Starting at the Colorado/Wyoming border, he was making his way south to the Colorado/New Mexico border, following the same Continental Divide Trail we were using.

It was at that point that I got a little concerned for our new friend. We (my son, Zach, my brother-in-law, Bob, and I) were hiking south on the Continental Divide Trail (in other words, toward New Mexico).

When we bumped into each other, he was walking toward us (that is, north, in the direction of Wyoming).

I asked him to clarify, "Did you say that you are traveling *from* Wyoming or *to* Wyoming?"

"Oh, I started out at Wyoming several weeks ago," he told us, "and I'm heading south."

Now you want to be careful in this kind of a situation. Unless you want a fight on your hands, you don't question a man's grilling skills, his mechanical ability, or his directional capabilities.

I knew it was especially dicey to question a guy who had already traveled several hundred miles on the trail and who had been out for some weeks. But I had to say something.

"Dude, you're going the wrong way. You're heading back to Wyoming! We're traveling south and you're passing us heading north. Look at the compass."

He did - and immediately saw the error of his ways. He actually thanked us profusely and headed back the way he had come, at a really fast clip. (Embarrassment is a great energy booster.)

We watched him as he nearly jogged down the trail and knew exactly what had happened. Many others have done the same thing. He failed to consult his map and compass when setting out for the day's travel.

In the mountains, the scenery can get monotonous. It's beautiful, but there is a sameness to it. And this guy didn't even recognize that he had just passed through the same area the day before.

He lost his bearings and as a result lost nearly a half day's travel time. That morning he had hiked efficiently and quickly to the point where he met us - but he was going in the wrong direction. He wasn't any closer to New Mexico. He was lost, but making excellent time.

The point? In the wilderness, it can be disastrous to go in the direction that *seems* right. Always follow the compass. Always consult the map.

And what is true in wilderness travel is undeniably true when it comes to life with Jesus.

Last Sunday, we looked at the beginning of the First Missionary Journey. Those first steps were filled with excitement and high adventure.

But, the three missionaries - Paul and Barnabas and John Mark - quickly became two when they started to head into the region called Galatia. John Mark abandoned both the mission and his fellow missionaries and went home to Jerusalem.

And, by leaving he did two things. One, he made the rest of the trip much harder for Paul and Barnabas. Two, he missed so much by going home early.

John Mark's example calls us, today, to stay engaged, get involved in ministry, serve the Lord - at home, at work and school, here at church. There is no future in watching others shed blood, sweat, and tears for Christ while we sip lemonade on the sidelines. We don't want to miss out on the adventure!

That was last week. Don't quit! Get in the game!

This week as we watch Paul and Barnabas continue with the First Missionary Journey we hear a slightly different message.

Stay on course. Don't veer on to a side trail. Don't depend on what *seems* right, but on the sure direction given by the map and compass of the Lord Jesus' commands.

During His earthly ministry, the Lord Jesus issued a good many commands, all of them recorded in the Gospels. And, while they are all critically important, Christians have identified three of them as so central to His message that they are named.

- There is Jesus' **Great Commandment**. We are to love the Lord our God with all our heart, soul, mind, and strength. (Mark 12:30)
- There is also Jesus' **New Commandment**. We are to love each other, our fellow Christians, the way Jesus loved us. (John 13:34-35)

- And, there is Jesus' **Great Commission**. We are to make disciples of all the nations, baptizing them in the Name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, and teaching them to observe all that Jesus commanded.

Of those three, the third - MAKE DISCIPLES! - is on display today.

On this, the First Missionary Journey, Paul and Barnabas traveled through dangerous territory to take the Gospel to people who had never even heard the Name of Jesus. That is big-time Great Commission stuff.

The two apostles¹ embraced Jesus' command to make disciples at every step along the way and recalibrated their compasses to His true north when it might have been appealing to veer right or left. They stayed on course.

Staying on course meant heading into the treacherous territory of Galatia. And the first significant ministry in Galatia took place in a city called Antioch.

Destination #1: (Pisidian) Antioch (13:13-52)

Taking Jesus to (Pisidian) Antioch (vv. 13-15)

Pisidian Antioch (vv. 13-14a)

[13] Now Paul and his companions put out to sea from Paphos and came to Perga in Pamphylia; but John left them and returned to Jerusalem. [14] But going on from Perga, they arrived at Pisidian Antioch...

We know that these two had been sent out from a city called Antioch. THAT Antioch was in the region of present-day Syria.

THIS Antioch (Acts 13:14) was a Roman colony located near the borders of Phrygia and Pisidia and was located far off the coast in the rugged terrain of the Taurus mountain range.²

¹ They are referred to as "apostles" in this section at Acts 14:14.

² These are serious mountains, with peaks ranging from 10-12,000 ft. in elevation.

The region was home to independent mountain tribesmen who had successfully resisted the attempts of the Persians to subdue them, and, centuries later, the Greeks.

The people of Pisidian Antioch were notoriously tough. And Paul and Barnabas were eager to bring them the Gospel of Jesus.

Now, whenever Paul went to a new location with the Gospel, it was his habit to seek out the Jewish population first. That's exactly what he did in Pisidian Antioch.

To the Jew first (v. 14b)

[14b]...and on the Sabbath day they went into the synagogue and sat down.

It made sense to go to the Jews first!

One, they were monotheistic. Two, they were familiar with the Old Testament's teaching. And three, they understood that God was going to send a Messiah and were (at least in theory) more likely to be receptive to a message proclaiming Jesus as that Messiah.

A typical first century synagogue service consisted of two public readings of Scripture, one from the Law³ and one from the Prophets.

Paul and Barnabas were well schooled in how things worked during synagogue services, so they sat through the service, listening politely (as you do, week after week after week after week...).

Near the end of the service, the regulars noted the presence of two visitors. Ushers were sent to them armed with an invitation.

An invite Paul couldn't refuse (v. 15)

[15] After the reading of the Law and the Prophets, the synagogue officials sent to them, saying, "Brethren, if you have any word of exhortation for the people, say it."

³ The Law was read through every three years, according to a lectionary schedule.

Paul was not one to need a second invitation to speak, so he stepped up to the mic to present the message that Jesus was the long-expected Messiah.⁴

Taking Jesus to a Synagogue (vv. 16-41)

A Jewish history lesson (vv. 16-22)

If this was a normally constructed synagogue, he would have stepped on to raised platform and would have stood behind a podium (called a *bema*) to speak.

The crowd, made up of reverent Jews and God-fearing Gentiles, was prepared to listen intently to this guest.

[16] Paul stood up,⁵ and motioning with his hand said, "Men of Israel, and you who fear God, listen: [17] The God of this people Israel chose our fathers, and made the people great during their stay in the land of Egypt, and with an uplifted arm He led them out from it. [18] For a period of about forty years He put up with them in the wilderness. [19] When He had destroyed seven nations in the land of Canaan, He distributed their land as an inheritance-- all of which took about four hundred and fifty years.⁶ [20] After these things He gave them judges until Samuel the prophet. [21] Then they asked for a king, and God gave them Saul the son of Kish, a man of the tribe of Benjamin, for forty years. [22] After He had removed him, He raised up David to be their king, concerning whom He also testified and said, 'I HAVE FOUND DAVID the son of Jesse, A MAN AFTER MY HEART, who will do all My will.'"⁷

⁴ Luke records a number of "sample sermons" from Paul in Acts (14:15-17; 17:22-31; 20:18-35). This particular sermon demonstrates how Paul preached to an audience that was grounded in the Old Testament.

⁵ It seems that standing was the posture for preaching in these synagogues. Jesus, however, stood to read and then sat to expound. (Luke 4:20)

⁶ The 450 years would include the 400 years of Egyptian captivity, the 40 years of wilderness wandering and the 10 years of conquest under Joshua.

⁷ Similar to Stephen's sermon (and somewhat to Peter's on Pentecost, for that matter) - a retrospective on Israel's past.

I'm pretty confident that what we have in Acts 13 is not the entire text of Paul's message, but the Cliff Notes. This is just a summary of the stories he told when he was given the opportunity to preach, and they were all stories with which his audience would have been very familiar.

He recounted the Egypt experience, drawing attention to the Exodus, where God led them out by way of the parted Red Sea.

He reminded them of the forty years the nation had spent wandering around in the wilderness, all because of their rebellion! He even said that God "*put up with them.*" (which is certainly not a very flattering way to describe God's attitude toward them!)

He brought to their minds the wonderful victories God gave them under Joshua's leadership, while they were in the land of promise, mentioning the seven nations that were overthrown.⁸

He recalled the period of the Judges, which would have brought to the people's mind an embarrassingly rebellious period of Israel's history.

And then he reminded them of the installation of King Saul, which was followed by the reign of the righteous King, God's choice - David, the man after God's heart.

David had been dead for about a thousand years at the time Paul gave this message, and it looked as if his "house" had passed away forever.

But in that little synagogue in Pisidian Antioch Paul told the Jews there that David's sovereignty had passed to Jesus!

Telling the story of Jesus! (vv. 23-31)

[23] "From the descendants of this man, according to promise, God has brought to Israel a Savior, Jesus,

⁸ Cf. Deuteronomy 7:1 - "*When the LORD your God shall bring you into the land where you are entering to possess it, and shall clear away many nations before you, the Hittites and the Girgashites and the Amorites and the Canaanites and the Perizzites and the Hivites and the Jebusites, seven nations greater and stronger than you*"

[24] after John had proclaimed before His coming a baptism of repentance to all the people of Israel. [25] And while John was completing his course, he kept saying, 'What do you suppose that I am? I am not He. But behold, one is coming after me the sandals of whose feet I am not worthy to untie.' [26] Brethren, sons of Abraham's family, and those among you who fear God, to us the message of this salvation has been sent. [27] For those who live in Jerusalem, and their rulers, recognizing neither Him nor the utterances of the prophets which are read every Sabbath, fulfilled these by condemning Him. [28] And though they found no ground for putting Him to death, they asked Pilate that He be executed. [29] And when they had carried out all that was written concerning Him, they took Him down from the cross and laid Him in a tomb. [30] But God raised Him from the dead;⁹ [31] and for many days He appeared to those who came up with Him from Galilee to Jerusalem, the very ones who are now His witnesses to the people."

In this Jewish synagogue, six hundred miles from Jerusalem, to a group who had never heard the story, Paul told the story of Jesus.

He told them about how John the Baptist prepared the way. He told stories about Jesus' life and about His death. He told them that Jesus rose from the dead.

And then he invited all the adults, the youth and the children there in Pisidian Antioch to place their trust in Jesus for salvation.

Evangelizing! (vv. 32-40)

[38] "Therefore let it be known to you, brethren, that through Him forgiveness of sins is proclaimed to you, [39] and through Him everyone who believes is freed from all things, from which you could not be freed through the Law of Moses."

[40] "Therefore, take heed, so that the thing spoken of in the Prophets may not come upon you:

[41] 'BEHOLD, YOU SCOFFERS, AND MARVEL, AND PERISH;

FOR I AM ACCOMPLISHING A WORK IN YOUR DAYS,

⁹ Paul references the period of the resurrection, just as do most of the Christian speakers in Acts.

A WORK WHICH YOU WILL NEVER BELIEVE, THOUGH SOMEONE SHOULD DESCRIBE IT TO YOU.”

Every time anyone gives the Gospel, listeners are presented with a choice. Some who listen choose Jesus. Some don't. But the initial response in Antioch to the apostles' invitation was *very* promising.

Taking Jesus to the Gentiles (vv. 42-50)

Some respond positively (vv. 42-43)

[42] As Paul and Barnabas were going out, the people kept begging that these things might be spoken to them the next Sabbath. [43] Now when the meeting of the synagogue had broken up, many of the Jews and of the God-fearing proselytes followed Paul and Barnabas, who, speaking to them, were urging them to continue in the grace of God.

You can almost picture Paul and Barnabas, greeting people at the door of the synagogue as they left, shaking hands and hearing, *“Fine message, preacher. Looking forward to hearing you again next week.”*

Great! They were going to get a second shot next Sabbath (that would be Saturday morning)!

Some oppose and reject (vv. 44-45)

[44] And the next Sabbath nearly the whole city assembled to hear the word of God. [45] But when the Jews saw the crowds, they were filled with jealousy and began contradicting the things spoken by Paul, and were blaspheming.

When they arrived on that next Sabbath, the place was packed out! Nearly everybody in Antioch - JEWS and GENTILES! - came to hear the new kind of message Paul and Barnabas had brought with them.

But this synagogue service turned out a bit different than we might have hoped. Problems arose because the synagogue's power brokers ***[45] were filled with jealousy*** because of the attention that Paul and Barnabas AND their message were receiving.

They contradicted Paul's speech while he was speaking. Luke even says that they ***“blasphemed”*** - which is not to say that they cursed God (the normal sense of the word), but that they attacked Paul's words.

Paul took it in stride, though, and from that moment on, while in Pisidian Antioch, he turned his attention to the Gentiles.¹⁰

Turning to the Gentiles (vv. 46-49)

[46] Paul and Barnabas spoke out boldly and said, ‘It was necessary that the word of God should be spoken to you first; since you repudiate it, and judge yourselves unworthy of eternal life, behold, we are turning to the Gentiles. [47] For so the Lord has commanded us, “I HAVE PLACED YOU AS A LIGHT FOR THE GENTILES, THAT YOU MAY BRING SALVATION TO THE END OF THE EARTH.”

Well, the Gentiles in the city couldn't have been more pleased with this development!

[48] When the Gentiles heard this, they began rejoicing and glorifying the word of the Lord; and as many as had been appointed to eternal life believed.¹¹ [49] And the word of the Lord was being spread through the whole region.

But the Jewish people in town had been “dissed” and they weren't happy at all.

Driven out of town (v. 50)

[50] But the Jews incited the devout women of prominence and the leading men of the city and instigated a persecution against Paul and Barnabas, and drove them out of their district.

¹⁰ In Antioch, Paul turned to the Gentiles. And this pattern was repeated in city after city.

¹¹ It is impossible to miss the reference to God's election here. The words “were appointed” come from the verb “tasso” a military word meaning “to arrange” or “to assign.” Luke used it here to show that God's elective decree included Gentiles.

The final report from Antioch shows the apostles shaking *[51]...off the dust of their feet¹² in protest against them and* leaving Antioch - while the new converts were smiling from ear to ear.

So, it is a rather inauspicious beginning. Paul and Barnabas have been ousted from Antioch. But this missionary journey isn't over. Not by a long shot!

They checked their map just to be sure. And sure enough, it still showed places to go and people to see who haven't heard about Jesus. The Great Commission map still said, "Go!" and this time the compass pointed due east. They are off to the city of Iconium!

Destination #2: Iconium (13:51--4:7)

[51] But they shook off the dust of their feet in protest against them and went to Iconium. [52] And the disciples were continually filled with joy and with the Holy Spirit.

The City of Iconium¹³

In the first century Iconium was the chief city of Lycaonia, a district of Phrygia. It was about a sixty mile walk from Antioch. (Easily said. When was the last time any of us walked sixty miles...?)

When they arrived at Iconium, Paul and Barnabas followed the pattern set at Pisidian Antioch and headed straight to the synagogue to take the message of Jesus to the Jews first.

Fruitful, Frustrating Ministry in Iconium (vv. 1-4)

Some believed (v. 1)

We don't know which of the two did the lion's share of speaking (tag-team preaching?), but we do learn that there was a tremendous response to the message.

[1] In Iconium, they entered the synagogue of the Jews together, and spoke in such a manner that a great multitude believed, both of Jews and of Greeks.

The Holy Spirit was moving in people's hearts in response to the message and He was validating the message with miraculous *[3] signs and wonders.*¹⁴

But not EVERYBODY believed. And those who didn't believe were doing their best to make life miserable for the two apostles.

Some rejected (vv. 2, 4)

[2] But the Jews who disbelieved stirred up the minds of the Gentiles, and embittered them against the brethren....[4] But the people of the city were divided; and some sided with the Jews, and some with the apostles.

Life in Iconium was getting interesting. Opposition to the message was fierce. Battle lines were drawn. Things were turning ugly. And Paul and Barnabas were forced to the conclusion that they needed to hit the road.

Rejected in Iconium (vv. 5-6)

[5] And when an attempt was made by both the Gentiles and the Jews with their rulers, to mistreat and to stone them, [6] they became aware of it and fled to the cities of Lycaonia, Lystra and Derbe, and the surrounding region; [7] and there they continued to preach the gospel.

We're following them as they follow the Great Commission map, right. From Antioch to Seleucia to Salamis to Paphos to Pisidian Antioch to Iconium.

Next stop on the "Follow Jesus Tour" - Lystra!

¹² Jesus told His disciples to "*shake off the dust from your feet*" if a town did not receive their message. (Matthew 10:14; Mark 6:11; Luke 9:5; 10:11)

¹³ Iconium is the modern city of Konya in Turkey.

¹⁴ Later, Paul would refer to these miracles to validate the reality of the Gospel among the Galatians.

Destination #3: Lystra (14:8-20a)

The City of Lystra

There is really very little known about the city of Lystra. It was likely a smaller city, maybe an out-of-the-way place. And having just been chased out of Iconium, Lystra might have been just the sort of place Paul and Barnabas needed to lay low for a bit.

If it could have been something of a hideout, they didn't stay undercover long. They saw opportunities in Lystra and were soon talking about Jesus. Well, one day, while Paul was speaking in Lystra, something tremendous happened that tremendously complicated their stay there.

Ministry at Lystra - It's Complicated... (vv. 8-18)

*The lame walk! (vv. 8-10)*¹⁵

He wasn't inside in a Jewish synagogue. He was outside. This might have been open-air preaching, street-corner preaching.

And while he was speaking, he noticed a man in the crowd that had gathered who was sitting there, **[8]... without strength in his feet, lame from his mother's womb, who had never walked.**

Listen to the way Luke describes this man's condition. He piles on descriptions of his misery.

He doesn't tell us simply that the man was disabled. No. He was lame from birth **and** he had never walked **and** he was crippled in his feet.

Well, **[9] This man was listening to Paul as he spoke, who, when he had fixed his gaze on him, and had seen that he had faith to be made well, [10] said with a loud voice, 'Stand upright on your feet.' And he leaped up and began to walk."**

¹⁵ Paul's healing of this man parallels Peter's healing in chapter 3. In each case the crippled man was lame from birth. Both apostles gazed at the one to be healed. Both healed men responded by jumping and walking. If nothing else, this shows that Paul was equal to Peter in his apostleship. This was likely even Luke's intent in recording the details of the healing as he did.

What a wonderful miracle! Clearly, it was the power of the Lord that enabled this man, lame from birth, to walk.

That's the way we see it. But the good people of Lystra didn't automatically jump to the conclusion that you or I would if we were to see such a sight. We would have given praise to God for this miracle.

But the superstitious folks of Lystra jumped to the conclusion that Paul and Barnabas were gods!

The people misunderstand (vv. 11-13)

[11] And when the multitudes saw what Paul had done, they raised their voice, saying in the Lycaonian language, 'The gods have become like men and have come down to us.'¹⁶ **[12] And they began calling Barnabas, Zeus, and Paul, Hermes, because he was the chief speaker.**¹⁷ **[13] And the priest of Zeus, whose temple was just outside the city, brought oxen and garlands to the gates, and wanted to offer sacrifice with the crowds.**

Since they were speaking in their peculiar Lycaonian language, Paul and Barnabas likely could not understand all that they were saying.

But they eventually got the gist of what was being said - and they were aghast at this gross misunderstanding!

A futile attempt to clarify (vv. 14-17)

[14] But when the apostles, Barnabas and Paul, heard of it, they tore their robes and rushed out into the crowd, crying out [15] and saying, 'Men, why are you doing these things?'

¹⁶ Attributing deity to the apostles could probably be traced to a legend about Zeus and Hermes visiting an aged Lystrian couple named Philemon and Baucis, who were abundantly rewarded for their hospitality.

¹⁷ If you are wondering why Barnabas would be referred to as Zeus (the chief god) when Paul was the leader, the answer is likely that Paul, as the spokesman, would be understood to be more the troubadour, herald. Barnabas' silence would identify him as the behind-the-scenes, dignified, calling-the-shots god, Zeus. Zeus was the chief god and Hermes the messenger equivalent to the Roman gods Jupiter and Mercury.

“We are also men of the same nature as you, and preach the gospel to you in order that you should turn from these vain things to a living God, WHO MADE THE HEAVEN AND THE EARTH AND THE SEA, AND ALL THAT IS IN THEM. [16] In the generations gone by He permitted all the nations to go their own ways; [17] and yet He did not leave Himself without witness, in that He did good and gave you rains from heaven and fruitful seasons, satisfying your hearts with food and gladness.”¹⁸

But even with these efforts, the attempt to direct worship at God was only marginally successful.

The crowds are not convinced.... (v. 18)

[18] Even saying these things, with difficulty they restrained the crowds from offering sacrifice to them.

The people were still not convinced that Paul and Barnabas were not gods. They still wanted to offer sacrifice to them. And the plot continues to thicken.

Chased Down and Stoned in Lystra (v. 19)

[19a] But Jews came from Antioch and Iconium...

While they were still in Lystra, with the Gentile multitudes hailing them as gods, the Jews who had opposed Paul and Barnabas in Antioch and Iconium traveled to Lystra and found the apostles.

Working behind the scenes, they convinced the crowds at Lystra that the apostles were dangerous men with a dangerous message - and they successfully ***“won over the multitudes.”***¹⁹ Just like that, Paul and Barnabas turn from being gods to villains in the eyes of the citizens of Lystra.

¹⁸ If Paul’s message to the Jewish synagogue in chapter 13 showed how he spoke to a biblically literate crowd, THIS message shows how he dealt with superstitious pagans. He highlights God’s activity in giving rain and crops and food and joy. He affirms that God holds Gentiles accountable and will judge them. But here, he does not overtly evangelize. This, more properly, might be called “pre-evangelism.”

¹⁹ This is the second of five times a crowd was incited because of Paul’s ministry as recorded in the book of Acts.

And what do you do with villains who visit your fair city? You punish them! So, ***[19]...they stoned Paul and dragged him out of the city, supposing him to be dead.***

Some people believe that Paul actually was dead, and that God miraculously raised him up. I’m not convinced of that. I am certain that he probably looked as good as dead!

He was badly beat up. He was at death’s door. So even if he wasn’t actually raised from the dead, his recovery was so rapid we can certainly consider it miraculous.

[20a] But while the disciples stood around him, he arose and entered the city.

And Paul went back to the city of Lystra to recuperate for the rest of the day and that night. And then - are you ready for this? - listen to what Paul and Barnabas did next.

They checked their map once more and found Jesus’ Great Commission still unfulfilled. The mission compass pointed further east, deeper into Galatia. And they pulled on their hiking boots and traveled some thirty more miles to the city of Derbe.

Destination #4: Derbe (14:20b-21a)

The City of Derbe (vv. 20-21a)

[20b]...The next day he went away with Barnabas to Derbe. [21a] After they had preached the gospel to that city and had made many disciples...

We all caught that, right? Rather than stay for a few recuperating days in Lystra, THE NEXT DAY they headed east and south to Derbe to preach the Gospel to the folks in that city.

And their ministry in Derbe was wildly successful.

They ***[21a] made many disciples.*** No mention is made of any opposition. Neither of the missionaries were pelted with rocks. They weren’t arrested. They weren’t harassed. Things went great in Derbe.

Well, after some time there, Paul and Barnabas decided that the stay in Derbe had come to an end. As well, by some means, they determined that their travels on this First Missionary Journey had come to an end. It was time to go back to Antioch, their home church.

So, what route do you suppose they took? What route would you have taken? Let's check out a real map.

They could have gone straight east from Derbe to Syrian Antioch. That would have been an overland journey of slightly more than two hundred miles. But they didn't go home that way.

Tarsus, Paul's hometown, was only about 160 miles farther down the road from Derbe. They could have gone to Tarsus to get rest and refreshment, and from there, headed to Syrian Antioch. But they didn't go that way, either.

No, the two apostles chose a very different route home.

Homeward Bound (vv. 21b-28)

About Face! (vv. 21b-25)

Returning to hard places (v. 21b)

[21b]...they returned to Lystra and to Iconium and to Antioch

What courage it would have taken to have returned to Lystra! Paul had just been stoned there!

What courage it would have taken to return to Iconium. There had been an assassination attempt on both of them there!

What courage it would have taken to return to Pisidian Antioch. They were actively opposed while there - and some of the opposition had traveled all the way to Lystra to take part in the stoning of Paul!

But they went back. Why? Because they were guided by the navigational tools - the map and compass - of Jesus' Great Commission!

And as they passed through the cities they had already visited, they established the new converts in truth.

Giving the converts fair warning (v. 22)

They met with these new believers, intent on ***[22a] strengthening the souls of the disciples, encouraging them to continue in the faith...***

They gave them promises of great blessing - and a fair warning: ***[22b] saying, "through many tribulations we must enter the kingdom of God."***

Having heard about and seen the experiences of the two apostles in each of the four cities, they would have known that following Jesus was not likely to be a walk in the park.

Paul and Barnabas then helped set up the groups of converts into functioning churches.

Providing structure (v. 23)

[23] When they had appointed elders²⁰ for them in every church, having prayed with fasting, they commended them to the Lord in whom they had believed. [24] They passed through Pisidia and came into Pamphylia. [25] When they had spoken the word in Perga, they went down to Attalia.

They were concerned to give the believers not only edification but also organization.

And our story ends with a description of the long trip home, the welcome they received when they returned home, and the report they gave to their brothers and sisters in the church at (Syrian) Antioch, their sending church.

²⁰ The elders appointed here were not raw pagans, but were probably men who had been steeped in Scripture prior to coming to Christ.

Reporting to the Home Church (vv. 26-28)²¹

[26] From there they sailed to Antioch, from which they had been commended to the grace of God for the work that they had accomplished. [27] When they had arrived and gathered the church together, they began to report all things that God had done with them and how He had opened a door of faith to the Gentiles. [28] And they spent a long time with the disciples.²²

Conclusion:

At the beginning this morning I told about a guy who had gotten turned around on a wilderness trail, and went in the wrong direction. In telling the story, I didn't mean to make fun of him. It happens. It can happen to anybody. It has happened to me.

On this most recent trip, our hope was to spend our first night on the trail at a small pond called Granite Lake. We missed it - and I'm sure that the map was not wrong. We just missed the markers for it. We weren't paying attention at the right bend in the trail.

Much more seriously it happened once when I took Ben and Zach on a trip years and years ago. I think they were about eleven and thirteen years of age. We were headed off on our first-ever big backpacking trip and were going to be traveling on trails I had never hiked.

I took a map, but I misread it early on. Within a few hours of leaving the trailhead, I couldn't find where we were on the map. I felt that we were lost, and for a dad leading his two young sons on a backcountry expedition, that's a bad feeling.

For the next couple of days I never knew exactly where we were. I did know that if we kept hiking north we would eventually cross a main trail that ran east-west, which we did.

It all worked out OK. But every time I've told this story in Kathy's presence, she says something like, "*Just think of the bad things that could have happened.*" (And when she doesn't say it out loud, I'm pretty sure she's thinking it.)

And, you know, she's right. Bad things happen when we misread or ignore the map. Bad things happen to Christians when they ignore Jesus' Great Commission, too.

There have been times in my life when I've allowed things to get in the way of the Great Commission. I can look back on years when I've ignored either being a disciple or making disciples.

I deeply regret those seasons of bushwhacking on trails of my own making. And what about those seasons when I've been Great Commission-minded?

Well, I've never had crowds of people throwing rocks at me like Paul did and I've never been the target of an assassination attempt. But life hasn't been perfectly easy when I've been following the Great Commission map.

But as I look back on those seasons when I have most heavily invested in the Great Commission - meeting with people for disciple-making, praying with and for people's spiritual growth, teaching people to observe all that Jesus commanded - I have not one single regret.

A life of no regrets consists of a life given to following Jesus' life map. It is the life of abundance now and it leads to great reward later.

This morning, will you join me in committing to walking in the footsteps of Paul and Barnabas and give yourself to both being a disciple and to making disciples?

To do anything else is to ignore the Master's map and there's simply no future in any other trail.

²¹ The First Missionary Journey lasted for a year or two.

²² Paul probably sat down to write the letter to the Galatians shortly after returning from the First Missionary Journey.