When last we met, Paul and Barnabas were on their initial missions journey throughout two countries: the island country of Cyprus and Turkey (Asia Minor in scripture). They had met with mixed results - at one time the people bowing down and calling them “gods” and on others fleeing for their very lives. Now we come to chapter 15.

CHAPTER 15

This chapter on one of those I call “watershed” chapters. Paul and Barnabas now had a full missions journey under their belt. They had been very successful, establishing a number of churches and making many converts to Jesus Christ. News of their work spread rapidly, even to “headquarters” - Jerusalem.

Now a delegation from Judea arrived in Antioch, wanting to hear the missionaries themselves. They dropped a bomb on Paul and Barnabas. They asked, “Well, you say these people are converts to our Lord. So... have they been circumcised?” The missionaries responded in the negative. This delegation then announced, “Then they are NOT saved!” So it was decided that Paul and Barnabas would journey to Jerusalem to answer them. The meeting was not going well until Peter stood to address them:

Acts 15:6-13 [The Message]
The apostles and leaders called a special meeting to consider the matter. [7] The arguments went on and on, back and forth, getting more and more heated. Then Peter took the floor: “Friends, you well know that from early on God made it quite plain that he wanted the pagans to hear the Message of this good news and embrace it—and not in any secondhand or roundabout way, but firsthand, straight from my mouth. [8] And God, who can’t be fooled by any pretense on our part but always knows a person’s thoughts, gave them the Holy Spirit exactly as he gave him to us. [9] He treated the outsiders exactly as he treated us, beginning at the very center of who they were and working from that center outward, cleaning up their lives as they trusted and believed him.

[10] “So why are you now trying to out-god God, loading these new believers down with rules that crushed our ancestors and crushed us, too? [11] Don’t we
believe that we are saved because the Master Jesus amazingly and out of sheer generosity moved to save us just as he did those from beyond our nation? So what are we arguing about?"

[12] There was dead silence. No one said a word. With the room quiet, Barnabas and Paul reported matter-of-factly on the miracles and wonders God had done among the other nations through their ministry. [13] The silence deepened; you could hear a pin drop.

James, who was considered the bishop of Jerusalem, announced his decision:

Acts 15:19-21

"So here is my decision: We're not going to unnecessarily burden non-Jewish people who turn to the Master. [20] We'll write them a letter and tell them, 'Be careful to not get involved in activities connected with idols, to guard the morality of sex and marriage, to not serve food offensive to Jewish Christians—blood, for instance.' [21] This is basic wisdom from Moses, preached and honored for centuries now in city after city as we have met and kept the Sabbath."

This ended what could have been a devastating situation. Even today there are those who want salvation to depend upon more than faith in the cross and the price that Jesus paid. My friend, you cannot earn your salvation; you cannot do some physical thing to your body to obtain it. It's Jesus Christ alone! MY HOPE IS BUILT ON NOTHING LESS THAN JESUS' BLOOD AND RIGHTEOUSNESS. I DARE NOT TRUST THE SWEETEST FRAME BUT WHOLLY LEAN ON JESUS' NAME.

In was in this chapter that Paul and Barnabas split up over the continuing ministry of Mark (who had left the team in the first missions endeavor.) Mark was Barnabas' ministry and Paul no longer trusted the young man. Yet in his last will and testament, II Timothy 4, Paul noted that Mark was now a most worthy carrier of the Gospel - showing strongly that a person can overcome a mistake and be very effective for Christ once again.

CHAPTER SIXTEEN - A RADICAL CHANGE OF DIRECTION FOR PAUL.

In this chapter we become familiar with a young man who would become like a son to Paul, the Greek Timothy. Early in the SECOND missions journey - this time with Silas rather than Barnabas, Paul returned to Lystra. He intended to continue establish works for Christ across Turkey. There he encountered the young man Timothy whose mother was Eunice, a Jew. His father, a Greek, has long since passed away. Eunice was a
strong follower of Jesus as was her mother Lois. So Timothy had a good heritage. Timothy’s hometown was not all that far from Tarsus where Paul had been born and raised. So these two men had a great deal in common culturally.

One night, Paul had a vision in which the Holy Spirit forbade him and Silas from continuing in Turkey. Instead, in the Spirit, he saw a man from Macedonia (northern Greece - Europe!) who pled with him to come help the people living there. As soon as he awakened he began making preparations for the journey.

The port of entry into Greece and Europe was Kavala (or Neapolis). I have been there in years gone by. Paul and Silas immediately headed north over the mountains into Philippi named after Prince Philip, the father of Alexander the Great. It was located on the main Roman highway that connected Rome on the west to Istanbul on the east. Just outside the city the missionaries met Lydia who apparently owned a textile mill in Thyatira (which became one of the cities Jesus address to John on the Isle of Patmos). Lydia became the first-known convert in all Europe.

It is interesting to me that Paul and Silas never intended to go into Europe, but God directed them. But as we see, His plans can also come with great complications. Preaching in the streets, Paul was verbally attacked by a girl known as a Pytho - a person who gave oracles to guide people concerning the future. She followed Paul and Silas about, crying out, (Acts 16:17) She started following Paul around, calling everyone’s attention to us by yelling out, "These men are working for the Most High God. They're laying out the road of salvation for you!" Paul recognized immediately that she was satanic and whirled on her to declare, (Acts 16:18) She did this for a number of days until Paul, finally fed up with her, turned and commanded the spirit that possessed her, "Out! In the name of Jesus Christ, get out of her!" And it was gone, just like that.

This infuriated the men who owned her and they turned Paul and Silas into the local authorities who never gave Paul the chance to show he was a Roman citizen and therefore due decent treatment. Instead he and Silas were both beaten bloody and thrown into prison.

One of the most moving experiences of my life was to stand in the ruins of that old prison, there in the dungeon, and see the place where these two heroes of the faith were bound. It was brutal place. They were tied or chained so that their backs were right against the jagged stonewall of the pit. The blood and gore would have dripped off their aching bodies into a trench beneath them, where spring water flowed through, flushing out the human debris. How did these men respond? After all, God had sent
them there, hadn’t He? Acts 16:25  Along about midnight, Paul and Silas were at prayer and singing a robust hymn to God. The other prisoners couldn't believe their ears.

As a result, the jailer himself and his family came to know Christ personally. On the day I stood there, I looked on the wall of the dungeon where someone had put up a plaque that read, “For me to live is Christ.” Sometimes we feel sorry for ourselves when things don’t go just the way we think they should. But not Paul. He just shook all these things off and kept pressing toward the prize of his high calling.

CHAPTER 17

Thessalonica. As this chapter opens, Paul and Silas had traveled over 100 miles along a very treacherous road in order to reach the great city of Thessalonica in northern Greece. To Paul, it was urgent that the gospel be brought to this city because it was located along the Egnatian Way which would be like an interstate in this country.

It did not take long for opposition - persecution - to Paul and his ministry began there. The ministry was met with great success and many came to know the Lord there.

Acts 17:5-7 But the hard-line Jews became furious over the conversions. Mad with jealousy, they rounded up a bunch of brawlers off the streets and soon had an ugly mob terrorizing the city as they hunted down Paul and Silas.

They broke into Jason's house, thinking that Paul and Silas were there. [6] When they couldn't find them, they collared Jason and his friends instead and dragged them before the city fathers, yelling hysterically, "These people are out to destroy the world, and now they've shown up on our doorstep, attacking everything we hold dear! [7] And Jason is hiding them, these traitors and turncoats who say Jesus is king and Caesar is nothing!"

Jason had protected Paul and Silas (he later mentioned in Romans 16:21 (Romans 16:21 Timotheus my workfellow, and Lucius, and Jason, and Sosipater, my kinsmen, salute you.) So the antagonists attacked Jason’s home. In verse 6 in the King James, they holler, “These who have turned the world upside down!” What a phrase.

Paul and Silas did not stay in Thessalonica very long and headed for Berea (Greece) not all that far away. There they found willing listeners: Acts 17:10-15 That night, under cover of darkness, their friends got Paul and Silas out of town as fast as they could. They sent them to Berea, where they again met with the Jewish community. [11] They were treated a lot better there than in Thessalonica. The Jews received Paul's message with enthusiasm and met with him daily, examining the Scriptures to
see if they supported what he said. [12] A lot of them became believers, including
many Greeks who were prominent in the community, women and men of influence.
[13] But it wasn’t long before reports got back to the Thessalonian hard-line Jews
that Paul was at it again, preaching the Word of God, this time in Berea. They lost
no time responding, and created a mob scene there, too. [14] With the help of his
friends, Paul gave them the slip—caught a boat and put out to sea. Silas and
Timothy stayed behind. [15] The men who helped Paul escape got him as far as
Athens and left him there. Paul sent word back with them to Silas and Timothy:
"Come as quickly as you can!"

Athens. When Paul got to Athens he was grieved in his spirit when he saw the idol
worship. The great Parthenon (which sits on the Acropolis) had already been
constructed nearly 500 years earlier. Within it were idols of every known description,
including the huge statue to Athena. Paul met with the “brain trust” of Athens on the
nearby Mars Hill. His opening line was priceless: Acts 17:22 (KJV) Then Paul
stood in the midst of Mars’ hill, and said, Ye men of Athens, I perceive that in all
things ye are too superstitious. Paul spoke of the one true God (not all those man-
made ones whose statues occupied the famed Parthenon. He said this one true God was
revealed in their time through Jesus Christ who had risen from the dead.

Some of the Athenians just walked away; others mocked; some were little more than
curious. But some were converted, among them Dionysius and a woman named
Damaris. All-in-all, it is safe to say that Paul had less success in Athens than any other
place he ministered, which caused him great sorrow.

CHAPTER 18 - Corinth

I have often traveled the scenic highway along the sea from Athens to Corinth. You
know that Greece resembles a twisted hour-glass with a narrow strip land connecting the
south and north ends. Corinth was located on that narrow isthmus, incredibly
strategically located between the Ionian and Aegean Sea. Its high point was the
Acrocorinth (think: Parthenon west), 1900 feet above the marketplace, upon which was
located the temple built to the sex goddess Aphrodite. It was operated by 1000
priestesses - translate: prostitutes.

The original Corinth had been destroyed by rampaging Roman armies 150 years earlier;
but Julius Caesar began a major re-construction of the city and, by the time of Paul - and
the Emperor Claudius - the city was growing rapidly and buildings were going up
everywhere.
Later, when Paul wrote back to the church, he cited the sins from which the saints there had been delivered: 1 Cor. 6:10-11 Nor thieves, nor covetous, nor drunkards, nor revilers, nor extortioners, shall inherit the kingdom of God. [11] And such were some of you: but ye are washed, but ye are sanctified, but ye are justified in the name of the Lord Jesus, and by the Spirit of our God.

Paul had to support himself in Corinth. He was a “tent-maker.” Don’t think of scouting pup tents here. Corinth was one of the major shipping ports in the world. How did those great ships move across the waters? Sails! Canvas! It would have been a good business for Paul. He had a team, Aquila and his wife Priscilla. They had been living in Rome but all Jews were expelled from the city by edict of Emperor Claudius.

It was during his time in Corinth that Paul went through a major personal crisis in his spirit. He apparently felt discouraged. It is not difficult to understand. We can only imagine the loneliness he felt. Memories of Athens were still fresh in his mind. He had to work for his material needs to the point he felt he was able to preach and teach as much as he wanted. Also contributing to his melancholy was the hostile attitude of his fellow Jews. And, of course, there was the wickedness all around him in Corinth. But at that low point came the divine response: Acts 18:9-10 (KJV) Then spake the Lord to Paul in the night by a vision, Be not afraid, but speak, and hold not thy peace: [10] For I am with thee, and no man shall set on thee to hurt thee: for I have much people in this city. Paul was so refreshed in his spirit that he stayed another year and a half in Corinth.

From Corinth, Paul headed for the great city of Ephesus.

CHAPTER 19 - Ephesus

Paul would spend two years in Ephesus on this round. Some of his colleagues spread the Gospel to outlying cities such as Colossae, Hierapolis and Laodicea. As far as we know, Paul himself never visited those cities; however, by now the Gospel was spreading quickly across Turkey.

Paul’s ministry was followed by the “signs and wonders” Jesus promised in Mark 16. There were healings and casting out of demons. Many sick persons requested handkerchiefs from the apostle, anointed or prayed over. Paul sent these cloths (with asking for money for them!!!!!!) and they were used as a point of contract with the sick and many were healed.

But trouble was brewing. Isn’t it usually in God’s work? There was a fellow in
All that remains of the once incredible Temple to Diana (one of the original 7 wonders of the world) is this lone column. To give you some perspective, this only a partial column. The columns stood over 60 feet high. To give you some perspective, the highest point in this sanctuary is 44 feet. Now imagine all those columns half again as high with the statue of Artemis centered within.

Ephesus named Demetrius, a silversmith who made little statues of Artemis (Diana), the Ephesian goddess (whose temple there was one of the seven wonders of the world.) He boasted of the money he was making off this business: Acts 19:25 Whom he called together with the workmen of like occupation, and said, Sirs, ye know that by this craft we have our wealth. So what was his problem? So many Ephesians were coming to Christ that the business of selling these little statues had virtually dried up.

You know, a church can be in a city for decades and no one ever gets very upset about it. But let people start finding Christ and a real revival ensues and the dollars what went to cults, the booze trade, and sex escapades start going to the missions fields and outreach ministries - and Satan gets very upset. If you step on a snake, it will bite you! So - the great stadium (theater) in Ephesus, which still exists today, and seats 25,000, filled up rapidly with followers of Diana, madder than wet hens. And they had taken two of Paul’s associates as hostages, Gaius and Aristarchus.

The only man who was finally able to quiet down this gang after two full hours was the
town clerk. He knew that the Romans (who controlled Ephesus) would crack down on any type of riotous behavior. He told the crowd to cool it, that Diana could take care of herself, and he quieted the mob.

CHAPTER 20

The riot in Ephesus was the last major incident of Paul's ministry in that city. He bade the Christians there farewell and left for Macedonia (northern Greece). He probably rode a freight carrier up the coast of present day Turkey. Troas, a post city, was located near the Dardanelle Straits. Here Paul hoped to meet Titus whom he had sent to minister in Corinth. Titus did not get there so Paul left and continued into Macedonia. Titus met him there and gave him good news from Corinth. In a moving passage in II Corinthians Paul remembered, 2 Cor. 7:5-7  

When we arrived in Macedonia province, we couldn't settle down. The fights in the church and the fears in our hearts kept us on pins and needles. We couldn't relax because we didn't know how it would turn out.  

[6] Then the God who lifts up the downcast lifted our heads and our hearts with the arrival of Titus. [7] We were glad just to see him, but the true reassurance came in what he told us about you: how much you cared, how much you grieved, how concerned you were for me. I went from worry to tranquility in no time!  

Paul probably spent the better part of a year in Macedonia, happy in spirit, and increasing the kingdom of God in that area.

Then Paul went south into Greece in the winter months of A.D. 56-57. It was during this time we believe Paul wrote his epistle to the church at Rome. Then Paul began to retract his steps with the ultimate goal of returning to Jerusalem. Some of the Gentile Christians wanted to go with him, giving living proof of his ministry to the church leaders in the Holy City....such people as Sopater of Berea, Aristarchus and Secundus of Thessalonica, Gaius of Derbe and Timothy, Tychicus and Trophimus of Asia.

The Sermon That Went Too Long

Acts 20:7-12

We met on Sunday to worship and celebrate the Master's Supper. Paul addressed the congregation. Our plan was to leave first thing in the morning, but Paul talked on, way past midnight. [8] We were meeting in a well-lighted upper room. [9] A young man named Eutychus was sitting in an open window. As Paul went on and on, Eutychus fell sound asleep and toppled out the third-story window. When they picked him up, he was dead. 

Master's Supper. And went on telling stories of the faith until dawn! On that note, they left—Paul going one way, [12] the congregation another, leading the boy off alive, and full of life themselves.

Paul and his Gentile companions sailed from Europe toward Jerusalem, intending to get there by the Day of Pentecost. Time was of the essence. Luke (who wrote Acts - remember?) gives us the travelogue which might not mean much to you unless you have sailed through that area yourself. But I can tell you first hand that it is some of the most spectacular sailing in all the world. The sea is the blest of blues and the islands are gorgeous. Paul knew he didn’t have time to return to Ephesus, so when the ship stopped at the coastal town of Miletus he sent to Ephesus and had the elders of the work meet him there near the ship.

Those elders dearly loved Paul and knew he was headed for danger and warned him not to go. But Paul wouldn’t have it: Acts 20:22-23 "But there is another urgency before me now. I feel compelled to go to Jerusalem. I'm completely in the dark about what will happen when I get there. [23] I do know that it won't be any picnic, for the Holy Spirit has let me know repeatedly and clearly that there are hard times and imprisonment ahead."

The response of the elders was heart-breaking: Acts 20:36-38 Then Paul went down on his knees, all of them kneeling with him, and prayed. [37] And then a river of tears. Much clinging to Paul, not wanting to let him go. [38] They knew they would never see him again—he had told them quite plainly. The pain cut deep. Then, bravely, they walked him down to the ship.

In our next meeting we will continue as Paul goes into Jerusalem - the beginning of the end.