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## *The Story: Paul's Mission* Acts 13ff

The other evening Cyndi and I were sitting at Menchie's enjoying a frozen yogurt when up walked one of our Chapel Hill seniors, Lexie, along with her friends. We got talking about universities and mascots and I mentioned something I'd just read about Whitman University in Walla Walla. It was founded in memory of the martyred missionary, Marcus Whitman. That week Whitman, which is definitely not a Christian university any longer, had voted to abandon their mascot: the Whitman Missionaries. Lexie asked me, "What will their new mascot be?" Like a smart aleck, I answered, "I don't know, probably the Whitman Apostates." Lexie's girlfriend was horrified, "The Whitman Prostates? What kind of mascot is that???"

Well, not a very appropriate one. But then again, neither was "Missionary." This week, as we conclude the final chapters of the Story, we meet perhaps the least appropriate missionary for Jesus Christ. His name was Paul. He was a brilliant, self-righteous, fanatical Jew who was determined to destroy the followers of this false prophet from Nazareth. We first met Paul when he stood, guarding the coats of the men who stoned St. Stephen to death. Later, on his way to Damascus to persecute more Christians, the darnedest thing happened: the risen Jesus appeared to him, knocked him on his keister, and persuaded him to become the greatest Christian missionary the world has ever known.

This week, we pick up the story many years later. Paul has now been mentored by that great saint, Barnabas. Together, they are serving as pastors to the booming Gentile church in Antioch. And in chapter 13, we read of the beginning of an epic adventure:

<sup>1</sup>Now there were in the church at Antioch prophets and teachers, Barnabas, Simeon who was called Niger, Lucius of Cyrene, Manaen a member of the court of Herod the tetrarch, and Saul. <sup>2</sup>While they were worshiping the Lord and fasting, the Holy Spirit said, "Set apart for me Barnabas and Saul for the work to which I have called them." <sup>3</sup>Then after fasting and praying they laid their hands on them and sent them off.

For the fun of it, let's just trace out that first missionary journey. From the port of Seleucia, they sailed to the homeland of Barnabas where the Roman official came to faith, then north to Perga where young John Mark abandoned them and returned to Jerusalem; then to Pisidian Antioch, an important city of the region. (Here's a picture of me last February standing on the wall of the synagogue, reading Paul's

sermon.) Next they travelled to Iconium and on to Lystra. There some angry folks from Antioch and Iconium caught up with them and stoned Paul, leaving him for dead. But he got up and kept going; on to Derbe where he preached the gospel, and then, remarkably, he retraced his steps back to the cities of the people who had just tried to kill him before catching a boat back to Antioch.

This first journey covered about 1,600 miles... mostly by foot. To put that in perspective, if last week, instead of flying down to Tijuana, we walked to Mexico and, when we were done, walked back north as far as Bakersfield we would have covered 1,600 miles. And this first was the shortest of Paul's journeys. He would make two longer missionary journeys, a trek to Rome and maybe to Spain. It has been estimated that Paul travelled nearly 14,000 miles in his ministry, mostly by foot. That would be the equivalent of walking back and forth across the United States at the narrowest point almost 7 times.

But sore feet were the least of Paul's troubles. During his journeys, he suffered horribly, and he described it in his second letter to the Corinthians, chapter 11:

<sup>24</sup>Five times I received from the Jews the forty lashes minus one. <sup>25</sup>Three times I was beaten with rods, once I was stoned, three times I was shipwrecked, I spent a night and a day in the open sea, <sup>26</sup>I have been constantly on the move. I have been in danger from rivers, in danger from bandits, in danger from my own countrymen, in danger from Gentiles; in danger in the city, in danger in the country, in danger at sea; and in danger from false brothers. <sup>27</sup>I have labored and toiled and have often gone without sleep; I have known hunger and thirst and have often gone without food; I have been cold and naked. <sup>28</sup>Besides everything else, I face daily the pressure of my concern for all the churches.

A few weeks ago I described the horror of flogging. The victim was stripped naked and lashed with a whip of many tails, all tipped with glass and metal. By the time it was over, his body was one open wound. Paul was flogged not once, not twice, not thrice, not four times—but five times... 195 lashes. Can you imagine the scars hidden beneath his robes?

Another popular punishment was a beating with rods the thickness of a finger. Not one rod but a handful of them. It is said that this felt like a red hot metal grate being pressed against your back. Paul received this treatment three times. On and on, the list goes: stoning, beatings, shipwrecks, snake bite, hunger, cold... over and over again.

Perhaps we can imagine having the courage to rise from a stoning, and return to the city of our would-be murderers... perhaps. Perhaps we can imagine having the courage to return to ministry after having been flogged... perhaps. But again and again and again? Surely there must have been a point—perhaps at lash number

100 or 125 or 175—when Paul said, “Enough! I’ve spilled enough blood. I’ve done my share. I quit!”

When my LifeGroup looked at this Friday, one man—a veteran who has faced death in battle—spoke for all of us: “I’d like to think I am a brave man, but I don’t think I could take this. At some point, I’d say, “I’m done. No more!” How about you?

I wrestled all week was this question: what would drive a man like Paul to endure such suffering and privation? Certainly it speaks to the power of the Holy Spirit within him. 57 times the Holy Spirit is mentioned in the Book of Acts. It has been said that we ought to call it, not the Acts of the Apostles, but the Acts of the Holy Spirit. Or maybe Paul was just so grateful to Jesus for saving him? Maybe it was love or loyalty that produced such endurance in Paul.

But I think there is something else, and it wasn’t until Thursday that I realized it was staring me in the face. This week we are hosting SOLD, a multi-sensory experience that highlights the horror of human trafficking. 36 million human beings live in slavery in our world today; 8 million in sexual slavery; 10.5 million of them children! It is horrific for us who live in freedom to imagine that such things still happen!

But as I reflected on this, the Spirit reminded of one of Paul’s favorite words to describe himself: Slave! Romans 1:1: “Paul, a slave of Christ Jesus...” Philippians 1:1: “Paul and Timothy, slaves of Christ Jesus.” Galatians 1:10: “...a slave of Christ.” Now if you turn to these passages you might say, “Wait a second; it doesn’t say ‘slave’ it says, ‘servant.’ Well the original Greek word is “*doulos*.” There are other Greek words for “servant” but *doulos* means, without question and without exception, “slave.” This book is one of 10 volumes of the most respected study of every significant Greek word in the Bible. Listen to what it says about “*doulos*.” “...the emphasis here is always on ‘serving as a slave’—service which is not a matter of choice for the one who renders it, which he has to perform whether he likes or not, because he is subject to the will of his owner.”

If that is so, why do most Bible translations soften the word slave to “servant” or “bondservant?” Because “slave” is so repugnant to us—the word “slave” transports us to a chapter in our history when human beings were captured by the millions, shipped to our shores under horrific circumstances, and forced under the lash to work our cotton and tobacco fields. In America—the Land of the Free—the word slave has awful connotations; “servant” is less offensive.

But at the time Paul called himself a *doulos* of Christ, he lived in a culture where slavery was just as repugnant. In the Roman world, the freedom of the citizen was a source of great dignity. The ultimate goal of every slave was to achieve freedom, and society was divided between the minority of freemen and the majority of slaves, the sub-humans who did their master’s bidding. The last thing a Roman citizen would desire or imagine was the idea of becoming a slave to anyone.

Yet Paul—a freeman, a Roman citizen—proudly called himself a “slave of Jesus Christ” which meant if his Master ordered him to walk 14,000 miles, he would go. If his service led him into dangerous places, he would go. If his service resulted in suffering or persecution, he would endure it and carry on. He was a slave of Jesus Christ. He was willing to go anywhere, do anything, suffer anything for the sake of his Lord. In a culture that ultimately valued freedom, Paul the free man was willing to become a slave of Jesus Christ. Why? Because Jesus Christ became a slave for him!

When Paul wrote to the Philippians, he described the Son of God who left heaven and came to earth this way: “<sup>5</sup>Have this mind among yourselves, which is yours in Christ Jesus, <sup>6</sup>who, though he was in the form of God, did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped, <sup>7</sup>but made himself nothing, taking the form of a (doulos) a slave!”

Jesus, the eternal Son of God, did not cling to his “god-ness” but emptied himself of his divine rights and came to earth as a slave. And he offered a vivid illustration of that at the Last Supper. Remember? During the meal, he got up, took off his outer garment, took up a basin of water and began to wash the feet of his disciples, one at a time... which horrified them! This demeaning task was reserved for the lowest, non-Jewish slave on the totem pole. Even a master would never expect his disciples to wash his feet. Yet Master Jesus modeled ultimate humility as a slave by washing the feet of his disciples.

And the ultimate expression of his self-imposed slavery was when He received the lashes, the humiliation, and finally death by crucifixion. Jesus, the Son of God, gave himself to be a doulos—a slave—to free us from our bondage to sin. When Paul experienced this sacrificial love on the road to Damascus, he was so smitten by the grace of Christ that he was willing to go anywhere and endure anything for the sake of the one who was willing to go anywhere and do anything to save him. He was willing to enslave himself to such a Master, because Jesus was worth it.

This takes me back to Exodus 21. There we read that after a Hebrew slave had served for six years, he was to be set free. But some slaves came to love the master and his family and did not want to leave their service. So this is what they did: They would take witness and go to a door of the master’s house, the slave would place his ear against the doorpost, and the master would drive an awl through his earlobe into the post. From that moment, there was no turning back. The rest of his life, he would be marked as a slave. But this was of his own choosing, because there was no place else he would rather be. He loved his master and was loved by him and wanted to live his life in the provision and protection of that household.

You know, that is supposed to be what happens to every one of us who is marked by baptism. We don’t drive awls through earlobes, but baptism is our ritual that

marks your entrance into the community of Jesus. Think about it. What is our confession when we are set free from the bondage of sin and welcomed into the church through baptism? What do we declare? "Jesus is Lord!" What do we think this means? Lord, Master, Ruler... every time we declare "Jesus is Lord," what are we saying if not the obvious: I am slave of Jesus Christ!

But that's not what I prefer. I prefer to think of Jesus as my slave. Most of us do. We like the idea of Slave-Jesus; the one who suffers and dies on my behalf; the one who takes away my sin and saves me from hell; the one who jumps to my bidding, answers my prayers, heals my diseases, meets my needs, blesses me. It is easy and way more comfortable to think of Jesus as my slave.

But that day has come and gone. Jesus the Slave became Jesus the Victor. Jesus the Slave who suffered and died became Jesus the Resurrected One. Jesus the Slave who knelt to wash filthy feet is now Jesus the Enthroned before whom all creation bows. Jesus the Slave is once again Jesus the Lord who will one day render righteous judgment upon every human being. Jesus is no longer Slave; that ship has sailed. Now, again, forever—Jesus Christ is Lord.

The obvious question then, is this: is Jesus my Lord. Do I trust him? Do I believe he can deliver me from my bondage to sin? Do I believe him to be a good and loving Master worthy of my trust, my devotion, my lifetime of service? In other words, can I echo Paul's words: "I, Mark, a slave of Jesus Christ." How about you? Are you a *doulos*—a slave—of Jesus Christ? If you are, what brave thing is he calling you to do?