

Life: Return to the task

August 7, 2015

- *The Bible Studies for Life lesson for Aug. 23 focuses on Acts 13:1-3, 44-52.*

I am not frequently ridiculed for being a Christian, but the worst incident occurred many years ago when I was a student in an undergraduate philosophy course at a state university. On the first day of class, the professor asked for the Christians in the room to raise their hands. Looking around the room, I noticed I was one of only three or four students who raised their hands. The professor then made me the representative Christian in the room, directing sarcastic comments and questions to me throughout the entire semester.

At the time, I dreaded going to class each week. I knew this was an opportunity to express my faith, but I was embarrassed by the demeaning attitude of the teacher. I have never, before or since, experienced that kind of ridicule by a professional educator.

Paul's travels begin

After the Antioch church commissioned Paul and Barnabas as missionaries, they likely began their travels wondering what kind of reception they would receive from the religious leaders in the towns they visited. Taking John Mark along with them, they traveled by boat to Cyprus, and then on to Perga in Pamphylia. At this stop on the journey, John Mark returned to Jerusalem. Paul and Barnabas then traveled on to Antioch in Pisidia.

Paul preached an amazing sermon at the synagogue there. He summarized the history of the people of Israel from their slavery in Egypt to the conquering of the Promised Land, through the time of the Judges and the reign of King David. Then he explained John the Baptist's prophecy about

the Messiah.

Paul said: “Before the coming of Jesus, John preached repentance and baptism to all the people of Israel. ... Fellow children of Abraham and you God-fearing Gentiles, it is to us that this message of salvation has been sent. ... What God promised our ancestors, he has fulfilled for us, their children, by raising up Jesus” (Acts 13:16-32).

The Holy Spirit moved

The Holy Spirit moved powerfully during Paul’s sermon. Acts says “many of the Jews and devout converts to Judaism followed Paul and Barnabas, who talked with them and urged them to continue in the grace of God” (Acts 13: 43). Not surprisingly, on the next Sabbath almost the entire city showed up to hear what Paul had to say. Paul and Barnabas’s growing popularity caused the Jewish leaders to be jealous of them. The leaders tried to sabotage Paul’s sermon by heckling him from the crowd.

Paul and Barnabas responded by saying “Since you reject (the gospel) and do not consider yourselves worthy of eternal life, we now turn to the Gentiles” (Acts 13: 46). The Gentiles welcomed the preaching of Paul and Barnabas, and “The word of the Lord spread through the whole region” (Acts 13:49). However, the Jews continued to stir up trouble, turning wealthy, prominent people against the dynamic duo.

Paul and Barnabas were not deterred by the ridicule they received. They considered the religious leaders’ rejection of the gospel to be a sign from the Spirit that they should turn to the Gentiles, who were a more receptive audience. To symbolize this decision, Paul and Barnabas shook the dust off their shoes before leaving the city. This action sent a strong message. In Mark 6:11, Jesus said, “And if any place will not welcome you or listen to you, leave that place and shake the dust off your feet as a testimony against them.”

Shoes as a form of protest

Even in Middle Eastern culture today, shoes are used as a form of protest. In 2008, for example, Iraqi journalist Muntadhar al-Zaidi threw both his shoes at then-United States President George W. Bush and called him a dog. Both throwing a shoe and calling someone a dog are horrible insults in Middle Eastern culture.

Although not as inflammatory as throwing their shoes, by simply dusting their sandals off, Paul and Barnabas were calling the religious leaders pagans because of their rejection of the gospel. Instead of fretting over the opposition in Pisidian Antioch, the missionaries moved on. They continued to do the ministry to which God called them.

Have you ever faced ridicule as a believer? We should not let the demeaning or even hostile attitudes of nonbelievers to discourage us. Not everyone will accept the message of salvation through Jesus Christ. However, if a church is to be on mission with God, it consistently must proclaim this message, whether it is popular or not. Our vitality and joy as believers does not rely on the approval of others, but rather on the power of the Spirit working in and through us.