

Traveling Mercies

Do you like to travel? Traveling can be exciting, educational and just plain fun, can't it? But there can also be another side to travel that the brochures and travel agents never talk about. Two weeks ago, 3,143 passengers excitedly boarded the Carnival Cruise ship *Triumph* for a 4-day cruise in the Gulf of Mexico. Imagine what they were thinking as that beautiful, huge ship pulled away from shore: great food, gorgeous weather, endless shopping and nighttime entertainment. "Wow! How lucky are we?" That reality lasted less than 24 hours.

A week ago Thursday the ship was towed back to port after a fire in the engine room knocked out the power on the second night. So, 3,143 sick, stinky, hungry and very disgruntled passengers had a rather different attitude as they disembarked. Maria Hernandez, age 28, said, "It was horrible, just horrible. I ...can't wait to get home." Kendall Jenkins said, "This is my first and last cruise." Stephanie Guillen was asked by a reporter if she was going to sue. She said, "Yes... I'm pretty sure everybody's going to do that."

Carnival Cruise Lines supplied buses to take the passengers from Mobile, Alabama, where the ship was towed, back to New Orleans where the trip originated. Adding insult to injury, one of the buses broke down halfway to New Orleans. ⁱ

The apostle Paul, like these passengers, had some unexpected and very challenging circumstances on his travels. Only his challenges didn't last one week. He took three trips, each trip lasting three to four years. The only reason he stopped traveling was because he was arrested and shipped to Rome to stand trial. And Paul's worst hardship wasn't a lack of electricity for four days – he NEVER had electricity OR indoor plumbing! Paul's life was literally threatened in almost every city he visited over the ten years he traveled. And at the end of his travels, did he whine, "It was so horrible! I can't wait to get home!?" Not exactly. Listen to what he wrote about the desperate difficulties he had encountered:

But this happened that we might not rely on ourselves but on God, who raises the dead. He has delivered us from such a deadly peril, and he will deliver us. On him we have set our hope that he will continue to deliver us, as you help us by your prayers. (II Cor. 1:9b-11a)

So, how could Paul, who had much worse travel conditions, have a radically more positive attitude at the end of his trips? That's what we need to explore this evening/morning. First, we must notice Paul's...

I. Reason for Crossing the Border.

I think we all can see that Paul's radically different attitude from the passengers aboard the cruise ship had to do with expectations, right? The cruise passengers *expected* to be pampered, to be waited on, to be served. There's nothing wrong with that. That's what they paid for. I'm just pointing out that the apostle Paul had a very different expectation. He *expected* to encounter hardship and he got what

he expected. But is it just that Paul *expected* hardship or that he was willing to endure hardship because his reason for going had more value than the hardship?

There's a saying that I've used before regarding the issue of value decisions in our lives that, I think, is pertinent here. The saying goes like this:

Cost is an issue only in the absence of value.

Do you see how this applies to both Paul and the cruise passengers? Carnival Cruise Line offered every passenger free tickets on another cruise PLUS \$500. They rejected their offer. Why? Because they found NO VALUE in being on a ship for a week with no power, no hot meals, no entertainment and no working toilets. Cost became a huge issue because of the absence of value.

But Paul was willing to pay a much, much higher price – years of discomfort, difficulty, beatings, being arrested, etc. etc. Why would he willingly pay that? Because the value that Paul found in just one soul being saved outweighed the cost.

So, what price do you put on one soul saved? What price would you pay? Kevin Miller is the associate rector of the Church of the Resurrection in Wheaton, Ill. He tells about watching his mother count the cost and then “cross a border” without ever leaving home while he was growing up. He writes:

When I was in junior and senior high school, we had a neighbor two doors down named Beard Miller. Since his wife had died, he lived alone...

One day my mom was praying and she heard the Lord say to her, “Feed the hungry.” She thought, “How can I feed the hungry?” Then she thought, “I can make dinner and send it down the street to Beard.”

Every night, she would make an extra amount for dinner. Then about 6:00, when we were ready to sit down for dinner, she would put together a plate with Beard's dinner... Then she would look at me and say, “Would you carry this down to Beard?”

I would walk down the street, knock on his door, and wait while he hobbled over and opened it. Beard always got a big smile when he saw me, because he knew, “This is by far the best meal of my day.”

My mom did that every single night... For three years, until Beard's health declined and he had to go to a nursing home, she obeyed what the Lord had asked, and she fed the hungry. ⁱⁱ

How much did that cost Mrs. Miller? I don't think it really mattered that much to her because the value of obeying God was much more important than the cost of food, time and effort. How much will it cost you to cross a border? That's the wrong question. The question is, “What's the value of crossing a border with the Good News of Jesus?” When you figure out the value, you'll have your answer to “how much will it cost?”

Next we need to examine this question...

II. If I Cross the Border, Where Will I Stay?

Last week we saw Paul's job description of a ministry leader, specifically an elder. In First Timothy, Paul gives a list of the qualifications of an elder. One of those qualifications is that he must be “hospitable” (I Tim. 3:2). Really? Hospitable? Why hospitable?

Whenever people go on short-term mission trips from this church, people usually want to know, “Where will we stay? Will it be safe?” That's a perfectly

legitimate question. In the first century, safety was provided by Christians for other Christians. We see that here in Acts 21. When Paul had to find a place to stay in a strange city, he went looking for the Christians...

We landed at Tyre, where our ship was to unload its cargo. Finding the disciples there, we stayed with them seven days. (Acts 21:3-4)

We continued our voyage from Tyre and landed at Ptolemais, where we greeted the brothers and stayed with them for a day. Leaving the next day, we reached Caesarea and stayed at the house of Philip the evangelist, one of the Seven. He had four unmarried daughters who prophesied. (Acts 21:7-9)

The Greek word translated “hospitable” is *philoxenos* which literally means, “loving strangers.” This isn’t talking about taking in boarders and providing a permanent shelter for them. It’s talking about providing shelter and safety for those who are traveling for the sake of the Gospel. I personally think this can be stretched to include providing shelter and safety “in another country” for those traveling for the sake of the Gospel. So, how would that work?

You may not choose to cross a geographic border yourself, but through your giving, through your prayers, couldn’t you “provide shelter and safety” for someone else who does? Some of us who do go on these trips can tell you true stories about how it doesn’t take long in another country before you realize, “This ain’t Kansas, Toto!”

On my first trip with people from this church to Ukraine, we spent the first night in Cherkassy, a city on the Dnieper River, just south of Kiev. Four of us guys got up early the next morning to take a stroll down along the banks of the river. It was a warm, summer morning, fishermen were out fishing, the sun was rising beautifully over the river. Then our hearts stopped as we saw the lifeless body of a young woman lying in the sand! Fortunately, we had great guides, a safe hotel to stay in and Ukrainian Christians to advise us. Still, one of our team members spent most of the day in the police station with one of the Ukrainian Christians just reporting what we saw. It was the “international hospitality,” the prayers and provisions of the people of this church that God used to keep us all safe.

Someone might ask, “How can you go on trips like that, when there are such safety issues?” My answer is this, “Do you know what the safest place on earth is? It’s standing in the middle of God’s will.” When God says, “Go!” I’m gonna go.

Thirdly, people who like to travel usually ask...

III. If I Cross a Border, What Sights Will I See?

On his three missionary journeys, the apostle Paul was within walking distance of four of the seven wonders of the ancient world. It appears he only saw one of them, which was the Temple of Artemis in Ephesus where he caused a riot by teaching that Artemis was a fake. In Acts 21: 1 it says that as they were sailing:

...we went to Rhodes and from there to Patara.

So, they must have landed in Rhodes. Rhodes was the home of one of the seven wonders, known as the Colossus of Rhodes. It was a statue of a man over 150 feet high, celebrating the victory of Rhodes over the ruler of Cyprus in 305 BC. It had collapsed in an earthquake in 226 BC, but for eight centuries tourists still traveled to Rhodes to see the ruins. Pliny the Elder remarked that you couldn’t wrap your arms

around the thumb of the statue. And did you know, by the way, that our Statue of Liberty was modeled after the Colossus of Rhodes?

So, Paul was there, in Rhodes, and he never even mentions this great wonder of the ancient world! What was he thinking?

I'll tell you what he was thinking: he was thinking of something with much greater staying power than seven architectural wonders. Only one of these ancient wonders is still standing today, the pyramid of Giza in Egypt. No, Paul was thinking about supernatural wonders, wonderful works of God that would not only last but would reproduce themselves by the billions over the centuries. He was thinking of simple, individual Christians, men and women, most whose names we don't even know, but people who committed themselves to Christ and then told a neighbor, told a friend, healed a hurt or fed an empty stomach in Jesus' name. At the end of most of Paul's letters, he lists names and says "thank you" to the first generation of these "supernatural wonders" in each of the cities where he planted a church. In verse 16 Luke introduces us to one such man with whom Paul stayed in Jerusalem:

Some of the disciples from Caesarea accompanied us and brought us to the home of Mnason, where we were to stay. He was a man from Cyprus and one of the early disciples. (Acts 21:16)

Such "wonders of the world" are still standing today. Open Doors is an international ministry that smuggles Bibles into closed countries. Can you imagine crossing the border from Communist China into North Korea with Bibles? In North Korea in the fifties, the dictator's soldiers herded entire congregations of Christians into the streets of their village and ran them over with bulldozers. But today, the sons and daughters of some of those Christians are smuggling Bibles back into those villages.

One man who has been doing this for years is known only as "The Traveler" to his western contacts. When one of the western leaders asked him what the church in North Korea prays for, he began to weep. Then he said, "...believers are prayerfully focused on one purpose: to be in place and fulfill God's will..."

It is estimated by Open Doors that there are 400,000 invisible, nameless believers in Jesus Christ, staying in place to do God's will in North Korea. This certainly is one of the supernatural wonders of the modern world. If you are interested in joining our North Korean brothers and sisters in prayer, you could visit the Open Doors website for more information: opendoorsusa.org

Paul had a very different list of "Sights to See" than most tourists. So should we. Lastly, we have a very practical question...

IV. If I Cross a Border, How Will I Find a Guide to Lead Me?

Sir Edmund Hilary had a guide, Tenzing Norgay, to get to the top of Mount Everest. M. H. Stanley had multiple guides to find Dr. David Livingstone. And Indiana Jones always had a guide on his adventures, right? So, you're going to need a guide to cross any border as well. Where will you find one?

If we look at the pattern of Scripture, what do we find? In most instances for the apostle Paul, he didn't have to find a guide because the guides found him! In Acts 21 Paul is heading to what, we know in hindsight, will be his biggest challenge of all; Jerusalem. Who will guide him? Well, guides were coming out of the woodwork.

Verse 10-12:

After we had been there (Caesarea) a number of days, a prophet named Agabus came down from Judea. Coming over to us, he took Paul's belt, tied his own hands and feet with it and said, "The Holy Spirit says, 'In this way the Jews of Jerusalem will bind the owner of this belt and will hand him over to the Gentiles.'" (Acts 21:10-12)

This was actually not news to Paul but simply confirmation of what the Holy Spirit had already impressed upon him which he reported in Acts 20:22-23 which says:

And now, compelled by the Spirit, I am going to Jerusalem, not knowing what will happen to me there. I only know that in every city the Holy Spirit warns me that prison and hardships are facing me.

And further back in Acts 19, the Spirit had already revealed to Paul that he would be going to Rome. So, what do we have here? Legitimate Prophets, people to whom God had actually revealed the future, predicted accurately that Paul would face hardship, suffering and prison by going to Jerusalem. Based on that, some of Paul's friends tried to persuade him not to go, thinking, "God couldn't possibly want you to go through all that!"

But Paul knew something they didn't know. He knew God had called him to testify also in Rome, so, though he didn't know how God was going to pull it off, he trusted that He would. So, Paul responded to their pleading, saying: (Acts 21:13)

...Why are you weeping and breaking my heart? I am ready not only to be bound, but also to die in Jerusalem for the name of the Lord Jesus.

In the midst of the madness that followed in Jerusalem, Jesus comes again to Paul in the middle of the night while he is in Roman custody and says to him:

...Take courage! As you have testified about me in Jerusalem, so you must also testify in Rome. (Acts 23:11)

So, what do we take from this? Take this: be careful, even of legitimate prophets. (Legitimate prophets are those who have never, ever been wrong. If someone calls himself a prophet, but he's made even one wrong prediction, the Bible says he is a "false prophet" and you should ignore him.) But even legitimate prophets don't have the whole picture. These prophets rightly foretold of difficulty for Paul, but those who heard the prophecies jumped to wrong conclusions. God didn't want Paul to avoid Jerusalem, but to go, knowing what was coming. Paul rightly listened to the Spirit within and would not be diverted.

Do you think God never wants you to encounter difficulty? You are wrong. God may lead you, like Paul, (and like Moses, like Joseph, like Ruth, like Esther, like David, like Abraham... like Jesus!) INTO difficulty, into danger. Why would He do that? So that you may testify about Him, tell His story to some who have never heard. We think the more gifted we are, the freer we should be to use our gifts for God. God dared to put His most gifted apostle in chains. And as a result, the Gospel spread like wildfire through the Roman Empire and beyond. God's Word and the Spirit within will always be your most reliable guide. Let's pray...

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- ⁱ “Carnival cruise ship passengers tell of ‘horrible’ conditions after disembarking,”
Tom Dart, Adam Gabbatt, *Guardian Newspaper*, Feb. 15, 2013
- ⁱⁱ Kevin Miller, “A Son Watches His Mom Obey the Lord,” PreachingToday.com