

THE BEACHES OF PAUL

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There are so many memories as I look out on the faces of you. I wish we all had the chance to chat in length. But my scripture today is going to be a travelogue scripture. I'm going to take from Acts 13 – 28 and three and a half-hours later we'll let you go!

The message, I've called it "The Beaches of Paul." The reason for this is that last March, just 6 months ago, I stood at the place where I'm going to read from the text this morning. Acts 13:1-5. "At the church at Antioch there were prophets and teachers, Barnabus, Simeon called Niger, Lucius of Cyrene, Manaen who had been brought up with Herod the tetrarch and Saul. While they were worshipping the Lord and fasting the Holy Spirit said, 'Set apart for me Barnabus and Saul for the work to which I have called them.' So after they had fasted and prayed, they placed their hands on them and sent them off. The two of them sent on their way by the Holy Spirit went down to Seleucia and sailed from there to Cyprus."

I stood on the beach at Seleucia. It was 15 miles from what we call Antioch Assyria today, the Turkish town of Anticha. It was a great early Gentile center of the Christian church and from Antioch the missionary movement to the Greco-Roman world began with such power. Paul and Barnabus would have either taken a riverboat down the river from Antioch to the beach at Seleucia or they would have walked the fifteen miles to the coastal city.

As I stood on that beach which I call the Beach of Beginning with a group of missionaries I had a profound spiritual experience and later when I got back home I went through the book of Acts. Even though I've written a college text on the book of Acts I'd never seen this before. In the book of Acts alone there are 22 beaches or shores or ports of call which Paul either sailed to or from. We live very close to a beach, Newport Beach. This is the Beach at Seleucia.

And I realized as I looked at those beaches – and my sermon today does not have 22 points, by the way, I selected four of those to describe the journeys of life that we're on. Because probably today every single one of us in this room are at one of these beaches.

The first one is the Beach of Beginnings. The beach at Seleucia. Acts 13 marks the beginning of a new movement in the book of Acts as the church transitions out of its Jerusalem, Judea, Samaria setting to take the gospel to the whole world. By the time you close, Acts 28, the gospel's gotten to Rome. And in between Seleucia and Rome churches have come into existence. It's an incredible movement that happens. From Acts 13-28 is a period of 15 years. And Seleucia is the point of beginning.

I realized as I stood on that beach that when Paul and Barnabus got ready to sail there had not been a single word of the New Testament that had yet been written. None of what we call the missionary churches had been founded. The churches that we read the letters today. The church at Corinth, the church at Ephesus, the church at Philippi, etc. Paul wrote 13 letters. He had not yet even met Luke who would write most of the New Testament because Luke wrote more words than anybody else. He wrote Luke-Acts which although there are only two books, actually have more words than Paul's thirteen letters put together.

I say to myself, what would have happened if they had not set sail from the Beach of Beginning. What really struck me as unusual as I stood on the beach that day is recognizing the itinerary.

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They evidently did not have in focus a five-year plan or a ten-year plan. Although I'm a great believer in left brain analysis and planning and all those kind of things we do in our modern culture it would appear to me that the first missionary journey, when they set sail they did not have a planned itinerary. Instead of doing the natural thing they were going to go up in the mainland of what is now Turkey. They could hug the coast and get to Perga and then get upland from Perga. But instead they sailed the opposite direction to Cyprus. Only when they're through walking down to Cyprus do they then turn and head up into what is today's modern Turkey.

As I stood on the beach it just struck me as strange. As I thought about that and as I felt the Spirit impress me with the truth that as people of the Spirit there are times we do not understand where it is God is wanting us to go. But we must be willing to hoist our sails and catch the wind of the Spirit. As programmed as we are in western culture and especially in this society we must as people of the Spirit be open to what God may want us to do and yet we can't hardly see beyond where we're standing. We just have to trust that the Holy Spirit knows where he's taking us.

That's the way it was when I came here in 1971. I was campus pastor at Evangel College. I preached to 1000 students every week in the campus chapel and they were required to attend. So I had a built in audience. It was wonderful! I had planned to do that the rest of my life. I had done my doctrinal work on the role of the campus pastor at the evangelical college. I was prepared to do that. I was 29 years of age. I thought that was my lifetime vocation. I was no sooner there two months into the fall semester in October of 1970 when in a tremendous revival meeting at the school when it just seemed like the Spirit of God swept over the campus. For a while classes were suspended and we just waited upon the Lord. The evening services which were totally voluntary were absolutely jammed. One of those evening services I was looking out over the expanse of that chapel to an oil painting one of our students had done of Christ on the cross and I felt the Holy Spirit say to me, George, look around here because this is not going to be your place of ministry much longer. It was such a foreign thought that I dismissed it. I didn't want to listen to it. I didn't tell my wife about it. It was odd.

But it was that word that kept me open when the letter came from the pulpit committee of what was then Glad Tidings Assembly of God Newport Beach and made me at least be open to it. Only after did I accept becoming pastor here did I discover that the week that I had the experience of "Look around here, George. This isn't going to be your place of ministry much longer." That that was the same week the church had declared a week of prayer and fasting as they began their search for a new pastor. We had no idea what we were getting into. But it was the beach of beginning.

Perhaps you're here today and you're at a beach of beginning in your life. Maybe it's a new job. Maybe you're a student and you're just getting started in a whole new arena of endeavor for you. Perhaps starting a new business. Maybe you've just gotten engaged, or just gotten married, or had a baby. Beginnings are wonderful things.

We would like to be able to peer into the future and know exactly where we're going but we do not know that. But we have someone who does know where we're going. If we will host the sails of the heart to catch the wind of the Spirit, the Spirit will guide us in terms of where he wants us to go.

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Someone has said to me, It's kind of a strange route you took to become general superintendent. I look back over my life and this should have never happened. But I do remember at ten, Jesus came along and invited me to get on the bus. So I've been on the bus with Jesus since I was ten. I just tried to ride along with him. He will take you places you cannot imagine you'd go. Some of which you'd prefer not to have gone to. But the beach of beginning is a wonderful, wonderful thing.

I'm at the Beach of Beginning again now in my life as at the age of 66 I step into a role that really should have somebody in their 40s. But I think like I'm 30 so it's still ok. One of my tasks is going to be to reach out to the younger generation and the younger ministers. We have presently in our nineteen schools we have 4000 young people that have declared ministry majors. We've got a great stream of young people coming online. We have, out of our 2.8 million people in the United States we have 1.1 million are under the age of 25. So this is a young dynamic church. And we want to be able to say to this young generation, There's a place for you. We need you. Let's fulfill the word of Malachi that "In the last days the hearts of the parents will be turned to their children and the hearts of the children will be turned to the parents." Let's be in this together.

If you know me, and I speak now to the crowd that knows me, we've got to be bridge builders. There are people in the body of Christ that are professional demolition experts. They just want to blow up everybody. They want to criticize this and they want to criticize that. Sometimes I get emails from people who identify themselves as watchers on the wall. The next one I get I'm going to tell them to get off the wall and go reach somebody for Jesus. I'm tired of all of these efforts to divide the body of Christ. We are one in the Spirit, we are one in the Lord, we have one faith, one Lord, one baptism. It's important that we act to unify the body of Christ and that the church of Jesus Christ is a big tent. It belongs to everybody who claims Jesus as Lord and savior.

Beach of Beginnings is a wonderful place.

The second beach I call the Beach of Perga. This I call the beach of bewilderment.

To be technical Perga is not actually a beach town. Atalia is the beach town but Paul doesn't mention Atalia until he's done with the first missionary journey. I'm going to do a bit of Bible detective work here while I explain why this is the beach of bewilderment.

The mountains are the Taurus mountains and it is quite a climb to get up there. If you're going to by foot, from the beach at zero elevation to over 4000 feet elevation, when you read about Paul in Corinthians saying, I've crossed rivers, I've been in danger of robbers, etc. He's talking about this area of getting up over there.

Why is Perga the Beach of Bewilderment? Several reasons.

It was at Perga that John Mark deserted Paul and Barnabus. And why did he desert them? There's some clues. One clue is when Barnabus and Saul left Antioch it was in that order – Barnabus and Saul. But by the time they got to Perga it was Paul and his company. Barnabus was John Mark's cousin and I wonder if John Mark didn't resent the fact that the number two guy had become the number one guy.

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Then there's this whole issue Paul would later write to the Galatians. He would say to them, It was because of illness I first preached the gospel to you. You would have even torn out your eyes for me. The Galatia area is up over those mountains. The supposition is – I can't prove this but the supposition is – that at Perga which is in the low lying malarial coastland Paul got bit by something. A bug. A mosquito. And got really sick. And he said, I've got to get up to the high mountainous plateau where I can get cooler air and recover which would have been common in those days for someone sick to take that posture. John Mark says, "You're crazy. You're as sick as a dog and you're going to go up over those mountains. You don't even know anybody up there. This is nuts. Dangerous. I'm going home."

Here's Paul on his first missionary journey. He's just gone through the more comfortable island of Cyprus where there already is a Christian community. And besides it was Barnabus' home island so they already knew the place. Now he's in unknown territory. The first time he gets into unknown territory he gets sick and he's facing the mountains. And John Mark says if you're not going home, I am. So John Mark quits. Barnabus fortunately stays with Paul and they hike up over the mountains until he gets up into the 4000 feet elevation. Perga, they didn't plan a church at Perga. It had to be a confusing time.

I've noticed this in my life and in the lives of others that often it is the case that when the Lord first talks to you about doing something and you start out and you have bells, lights and whistles. You know this is God's will. You know this is God's purpose. Then you get into it and where is God? What happened? Why am I confused? At Antioch the Spirit said, "Separate for me Barnabus and Saul." At Perga the Spirit is dead silent. He's not saying anything. Basically the Spirit is so quiet Paul has to decide what he's going to do. If Paul had turned around and gone home at that point we would have not had the book of Acts. We would not have had Paul's letters. We'd had nothing. Bewilderment is a tough time,

I knew something about that as pastor of this church. Within in the first 6 months that I was pastor at our little A frame church at 15th and Monrovia and some of you go back that far, the church went from 73 members to 49. My wife and I sat up one night in June of 1971 and spent almost the whole night sitting cross legged on the bed looking at one another wondering if we had gotten out of God's will. It was terribly bewildering. The temptation would be to just go back where it was safe. Where I had 1000 people required to hear me preach every week in chapel.

When we got ready to sell the facility on 22nd street and come build here. That was also bewildering. I thought, we'll run something up the flagpole. We need about \$150,000 for the down payment on the lease on this property. I was just sure that all 500 people that were in the church at that time would be gun-ho for that. We announced we'd set a goal. All the offerings on one Sunday would go to that. We needed \$150,000. And we got \$38,000. I was so confused. Is God in this? Not in this?

I called one of my pastor friends. He said relocating is like jumping into the lake. He said, if you're going to make it to the other side you've just got to keep swimming. And somehow we did it. This facility was built when Jimmy Carter was president. And the construction loan was 21%. We went for \$1200 a month payments to \$32,000 a month.

There are times when you get so bewildered. When I left the church, I'd been out of the church just a few weeks. In fact my second Sunday out of Newport Mesa I wound up speaking at a

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church that had 200 seats and 12 people in those seats. And not two of them were sitting together. And the lady in the second row was knitting while I preached. I said, What in the world did I do? I'd forgot places like this existed. It was bewildering. I went into a depression. When I look in the mirror it's easy to get depressed any way. Bewildered.

In those times of bewildering the best thing is to not stop. To not quit. There's a value to just keeping at it. The beach of bewilderment. You'll get through it. It takes time sometimes but you'll get through it.

Paul gets up to the highland, recovers and just fantastic things then happened.

The third beach that I want to focus on in Acts is what I call the Beach of Beckoning.

It's at Troas. Troas is in the northwestern section of present day Turkey. It's near Troy. Remember Helen of Troy. Troas is where Paul, Acts 16, gets the vision, "Come over to Macedonia and help us." The reason he gets that vision is he has walked from southeastern Turkey to northwestern Turkey a distance of over 1400 miles. Turkey is a long peninsula that has four mountain ranges that run east and west. He's been up and down mountain ranges. Walked over 1400 miles. The Spirit twice has told him where not to go but has not told him where *to* go. So he just keeps changing direction. He never sets down and has a pity party. Finally he gets to Troas and he's run out of walking room. It's the right time for a vision.

So, "Come over to Macedonia and help us." And there's this whole thing that will now pop open because when he responds, shortly within months there will be churches at Philippi, Berea, Thessalonica, Athens, Corinth. It'll be an incredibly productive time. But when he stood on that beach at Troas he could have said, "Up till this point in my life I have been very successful at what I've done. I along with Barnabus, have been a leader in the greatest church that's been founded – the church at Antioch. I have planted churches. I've done evangelism on Cyprus. It's ok if I stop now. I've done my thing. Not too many people have planted four or five churches in their ministry. I can just stop."

But he had this sense of What excitement does the Spirit have for me next? The beach of beckoning.

I think it's critical in our own Christian lives and certainly critical for the body, the church, to never get into a status quo mentality. We can't afford to have status quo. We must be asking what is the Spirit asking me to do next?

When I look back over my years here and see the many ministries that began and are still going today, it's very heartwarming because people – *you* – stood at the beach of beckoning and if you weren't at that beach yourself you stood with those who were at that beach.

It was I believe 86 or 85 that I'd become aware of several in the church that were doing foster care. As you know the abuse of children in our culture is pandemic, Wayne who was associate with me came to me, "We have these great summer camps for our own kids but I've got this idea. Having a camp for abused children. They're going to need intensive care. I can work with social services. Hey can give us about 30 kids. We'll need about 30 adult workers, a check for about \$5000." We didn't have \$5000. My view of the church treasury was it was the Old Testament widow's oil. It was meant to be emptied every week. We never had a dime. We

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thought if the Lord's put it in our hands we ought to be using it instead of saving it up. So we used it. So we didn't have \$5000. In fact that would at that time been larger than any weekly offering.

But we went to the congregation. We said, "We're at the beach of beckoning. [We didn't say that, I'm reading back into it. But that's where we were.] Will we do anything about this?" And sure enough our people gave \$5000.

I will never forget the Sunday evening when we sent off the first group. As we were standing around at the front praying someone began to give what I thought was a prophetic word. Actually they were quoting from Isaiah, which shows how well I knew my Bible! It said this, Isaiah 58, "If you spend yourself in behalf of the hungry and satisfy the needs of the oppressed then your light will rise in the darkness and your night will become like the noonday. The Lord will guide you always. He will satisfy your needs in a sun scorched land and will strengthen your frame. You'll be like a well-watered garden, like a spring whose waters never fail. Your people will rebuild the ancient ruins and will raise up the age-old foundation. You will be called Repairer of Broken Walls, Restorer of Streets with Dwellings." Isn't that what the church of Jesus Christ is all about? Repairer of broken walls, restorer of streets with dwellings.

This last summer I think there were 160 some camps and over 6000 kids. They're still standing at the Beach of Beckoning because there's still so much to do.

That's how I feel. I realize that the denomination of the Assemblies of God is 93 years of age. And typically people of 93 don't bear children any more. Denominations can get ecclesiastical sclerosis. They can get hardening of the categories and all those kind of things. But we have got to be people who are always standing on the edge. What does the Spirit want to do next? Because everything up till now is prologue. The Lord is laying a foundation in your life, in this church, in the body of Christ as a whole for what he wants yet to do. Beach of beckoning.

Some of you are at that today. You've done great up until now but the Spirit is saying, I've got something else. "I've given you this idea; go for it!"

The fourth beach is the toughest beach. I call it the Beach of Bending.

This is Caesarea by the Sea. Now we're in the holy land. Paul hit this beach a number of times both going and coming. But he hits this beach on the way to Jerusalem where he will be arrested. He will come back and he will spend two years here. From the ancient harbor he will go as prisoner to Rome. I call it the Beach of Bending because when the wind is adverse you bend. It's interesting. If you look carefully at the travelogue in the book of Acts on the beginning, at the early part of the 2nd missionary journey from Troas to Neopolis the port city of Philippi scripture says he got there in two days. Coming back on his way to Jerusalem it took him 5 days. It took him 5 days because the wind was against him. One time the wind was behind him, another time the wind was against him. When he comes here as a prisoner he'll be there two years unjustly and then he'll have this wild ride across the Mediterranean and he'll be two more years under house arrest in Rome and then the text closes and we don't really know what happened to him except from 2 Timothy we knew that he faced eminent death. He thought he faced eminent death. But out of that time of bending in his life come things like Ephesians, Philippians, Colossians, Philemon, 1 & 2 Timothy, Titus. Incredibly productive period but it was a period of terrible difficulty.

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As a pastor I've walked through times of bending. I think of the Saturday when I was just finishing up doing a wedding and word came to me that two of our wonderful parents had just been killed in a private plane crash. I went immediately to the home to meet with their 6 children. From wedding to death. A time of bending.

I've walked with people who have gotten the bad news of cancer. People in our church who have had financial ruin and failure. Persons whose spouses walked out on them. Just talked with people who were racked with tears and emotion and difficulty. When there were no real answers to why you just don't have the answer to why. It's a time of bending.

For Paul, though, those five years he could have been doing better things with his time than being a prisoner, that's for sure. What's interesting is Paul wrote the letter to the Romans before this 5-year period started. If you look at the heart of the letter to the Romans, Romans 8:18-to the end of the chapter, verse 39, you see him lay out four incredible perspectives of getting through the time of bending. Little did he know when he wrote it that he was going to have to live out what he had written. I'm trying to be more careful of what I write personally!

He says for example the glory will outweigh the groaning. We're groaning now. Doesn't sound too charismatic does it? Words like frustration, pain. He says we're groaning. But the glory that's coming will outweigh the groaning.

He says the Spirit is helping us. We don't know how to pray as we ought. We get confused. We're in the time of bewilderment. We're in the time of bending. We don't know how to pray as we ought. But the Spirit is praying through us with words that cannot be articulated. God is working in our lives.

He says "God is working all things for the good for those who love him and are called according to his purpose." In walking through it at the moment we don't see the good that can happen. Everything is bad! But God is the one person who is working for the good.

Then he says, "Nothing can separate us from the love of Christ. War can't, famine can't, pain can't, demons can't, height, depth, any creature. Nothing can separate us from the love of God that is in Christ our Lord." These are the assurances we have in a time of bending. That if God is for us, who can be against us. God is for us!

When I was in Turkey for the month of March, I was here for a consultation with our national leaders from Islamic countries. We have incredible churches that are reaching Moslem people, very dangerous ministry as you can well recognize. In many of the countries they are from it is a capital offense to convert from Islam to Christianity. Despite that the church of Jesus Christ is growing in the Islamic world. But I'll never forget the testimony of one of the pastors who related the experience of an Iranian young woman. She was at the University of Teheran. She became a believer and joined our college Christian group. A young man came into that group, ostensibly got converted and baptized in the Holy Spirit, baptized in water, became a member of the group, courted this young woman and married her. Then about a year later a little baby girl was born. When the girl was born he revealed to the group that he was actually there on assignment from the Muslim community to infiltrate the group. That his conversion was fake. That he was there to get the names of everybody that was part of it. He then preceded to divorce his wife and because in that Muslim dominated country the Muslim parent has the right of

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custody. When this young woman was called to go before the judge all she had to do was say, I'm a Moslem. In her heart she could have not believed that. All she needed to do was say it with her lips and the judge would have given her custody of her daughter. She could not do that. She was in a time of bending. She remained true to her faith. The end result was that her daughter was given to the father and she was entitled to spend one half hour a month at the police station with her daughter. In that one half hour every month she loves that little girl and talks to her about Jesus. Just this last spring, this little girl 6 years of age, as she sat on her mommy's lap and talked with her she put her arms around her mother and whispered in her ear, "Mommy, it's ok. I love Jesus and I always will."

I wish you could go in and rearrange those circumstances. But there are some things in life where you cannot change the circumstances. When I was pastor here a group of gals got together and gave me a plaque that says, "The same wind that uproots a tree, lifts a bird." And another saying that I use often: "What happens in you is more important than what happens to you."

In the bending times of life it is important that you sense if everything is against you, God is never against you. He who gave his own Son for us, will he not also give us all things."

I close with this: at the end of the baseball season every year I pull out the standings and check my theory. I got the newspaper this morning. We're one game away from ending the season so these stats are up to date. There are 30 teams, 30 major league baseball teams. You will discover – and I've done this now for about 15 years – that the teams that are at the top of their divisions – there are three divisions each in the National American league – 6 divisions. The teams that are at the top of their divisions and make the wild card play offs are the ones that have winning records on the road. Out of thirty teams in major league baseball, 20 this year had a winning record at home. Only 8 had a winning record on the road. Three had a tie record on the road. Two thirds win at home less than one third win on the road. That's the difference. That is the difference between a winner and an also ran.

Scriptures say to us as believers we are playing an away game. This world is not our home. We face adversity, we face trouble, we face difficulty of many kinds. Some simply because we're related to Adam. Some because we're related to Christ. But those who are more than conquerors through Christ who loved us win on the road. Our true citizenship is in heaven and I can tell you from my long journey at Newport Mesa that there are a lot of people that have already moved their location to that side. But while they were on this side they were already citizens of heaven.

My encouragement to you today is whatever beach you're on, do well at that beach. Do well at the Beach of Beginning. Listen to the voice of the Spirit. If you're at the Beach of Bewilderment, keep going. The fog will lift. If you're at the Beach of Beckoning, take on that new challenge. If you're at the Beach of Bending, God is with you.

God is with you.

Our gracious heavenly Father, today I thank you for this, your precious body. The body of Christ at Newport Mesa. I pray for us, Lord, that as a body today, so many needs are represented in this group. So many people at differing stages of their journey. You have grace for each of us at every stage. For those, Lord, that are here today who may have yet

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not begun the journey of the Christian life or perhaps began the journey but fell into a side trail, may this be a day of beginning and rebooting their walk with you. Out of this church Lord, has come wonderful creativity in ministering to the needs of culture in this community. We pray, Lord, that the hearts of many, it will be his come over to Macedonia and help us, this willingness to see beyond what we're doing now to what God can yet do through us. we pray, Lord, for those in bewilderment or bending they'll find your grace and strength in this hour to appreciate anew that you created us in your image and you do all things well. Though sometimes we walk through pain and suffering and nightmarish moments you promise is true: I will never leave you, I will never forsake you. I'm with you always unto the end of the age. In Christ's name I pray. Amen.