

1 FAITH ACCEPTED AND TESTED IN ICONIUM

“I am desperately in search of Paul, having been delivered from the flames”

THE YEAR is 48 AD.

THE PLACE is on the road between Antioch Pisidiaⁱ and the outskirts of Iconium,ⁱⁱ in the region bordering the Roman provinces of Phrygia and Galatia, in central Anatolia.ⁱⁱⁱ

THE SETTING: It is the First Missionary Journey of Paul. Barnabas, John Mark, and Paul have sailed from Paphos in Cyprus to Perga in Pamphylia in Anatolia. Wishing to return to Jerusalem, John Mark departed and Paul and Barnabas then traveled north to Antioch Pisidia, where they addressed the people in the synagogue on the sabbath. But because of threatening accusations by influential Jewish leaders and sympathizers, Paul and Barnabas have left Antioch Pisidia, after preaching to the Jews the first week and to all the town residents the following week.

The question was the same one that had been asked every day this past week: “Father, are the teachers coming today?”

And the answer, of course, was the same. “I don’t know, my son. Let’s go to the signpost at the edge of the town and wait. Hopefully, we can see them coming.”

The young boy’s name is Zeno. He is smart, eager, and craves learning about, and discovering new things. When he heard that special teachers were coming into town, he just had to be the first to listen to them and absorb everything they had to impart.

His father is named Onesiphorus,^{iv} a prominent merchant in an old Greek town that was now under Roman jurisdiction. He had heard about the life and ministry of a certain Jesus of Nazareth from traveling merchants, was sympathetic to the teachings, and wanted to learn more. When he received a letter from his old friend Titus, a teenage school buddy, that two disciples of the Jesus cult were coming to Iconium, he was very intrigued. He yearned to learn more about this new religion and was looking forward to meeting them. For both father and son, it was a fresh and exciting event.

ARRIVAL IN ICONIUM

MANY people, both Jew and Gentile, had listened to the teachings of Paul and Barnabas in Antioch, and many had become disciples. But many others had hardened their hearts in opposition, and resented their presence. Quickly, they formed a posse and confronted the two missionaries with an ugly ultimatum – “leave town or face the consequences.” They could not accept a free and open dialogue. So, Paul and Barnabas decided to slip away quietly and travel to Iconium, a town slightly to the southeast. To help ensure their safe departure, two of the new ‘disciples’ decided to accompany the missionaries, since they were ‘going that way anyway’. They were named Demas and Hermogenes.^v

Although claiming to be believers and followers, Paul could sense that their hearts were conflicted. Nevertheless, he treated them with the same love, respect, and affection as all the other disciples he had come to know. During the long walk on the road, he explained to them all about the oracles and doctrines of Jesus, and the Good News of salvation and eternal life, just as it had

been revealed to him on another road, on another fateful day.^{vi} But he couldn't help holding lingering doubts about their sincerity, and whether they might just be opportunists in disguise.^{vii}

Now, Onesiphorus had brought his family – his wife Lectra, and his sons Simmia and Zeno – to the crossroads at the outskirts of the town, where travelers from all directions would come to meet and greet residents and fellow traders alike. They hoped to be able to spot Paul and Barnabas, so as to meet and welcome them, and invite them to their house, although they had never actually seen them before.

Titus had given them a description of Paul's personage, both his appearance and his character, so they had an inkling of what to look for. They tirelessly stood by the edge of the road waiting with anticipation, comparing all who passed by with the description given them.

At length they saw a man coming of small stature, with balding head and ample beard. He was somewhat bow-legged, solidly built, and had greyish eyes, meeting eyebrows, large crooked nose, a mixture of pale and red in his complexion, and a sprinkling of grey on his head and beard – he fit the description. And he was full of presence. At one glance he would seem as a commoner, and at the next glance as a wizened philosopher. There was an air of dignity and wisdom about him. When they finally caught eye of each other, they immediately felt a connection – and they were joyful.

“Hail, servant of the blessed God,” shouted Onesiphorus. To which Paul replied, “The grace of God, and our Lord Jesus Christ, be with you and your family.” Then they warmly exchanged salutations and introductions to all.

But Demas and Hermogenes were moved with envy and jealousy. Under the pretense of equanimity, Demas said, “But are we not also servants of the blessed God? Why did you not salute us as such?”

With poise and composure, Onesiphorus replied, “Because I have not immediately perceived in you the fruits of righteousness, as I have in this man – my apology – please do not be offended – I may have been short-sighted. If you truly are of this disposition, then you shall be welcome in my house also.” With that, they all followed Lectra and the boys back to their house, while Paul, Barnabas, and Onesiphorus chatted excitedly.

i. Antioch Pisidia is not to be confused with Syrian Antioch, a place often visited by Paul and the early Christians, and one of the most important Roman cities in the eastern Mediterranean. Syrian Antioch is now a major town of southeastern Turkey, lying about 12 miles northwest of the Syrian border. It was **once** called ‘the cradle of Christianity’ as a result of its longevity, and the pivotal role that it played in the emergence of early Christianity. The New Testament asserts that the name ‘Christian’ first emerged there (Acts 11:26). Antioch Pisidia (also known as Antioch Phrygia), on the other hand, is in the Lakes Region of central Turkey, and is now basically just ruins. **However, in the first century, it was a trading crossroad and may have accommodated a population of 100,000.**

ii. One of Turkey's oldest continuously inhabited cities, the Iconium of Roman times is known as Konya in the present day. As the capital of the Seljuk Turks from the 12th to the 13th centuries, it ranked as one of the great cultural centers of Turkey. During that period, the mystic Mevlana sect founded a Sufi order known in the West as the Whirling Dervishes.

iii. Anatolia is also known as Asia Minor, the westernmost protrusion of the Asian continent, making up the majority of modern-day Turkey. The newly founded churches in Galatia were the target of Paul's letter to the Galatians (Epistle to the Galatians in the New Testament). Originally thought to have been written on his 2nd missionary journey (and visited again on his 3rd), many scholars now believe that it was actually written near the end of the 1st missionary journey.

iv. Latinized form of the Greek name Onesiforos, which means ‘bringing advantage **to**; profit-bearing/bringing; beneficial’

v. Hermogenes **was a coppersmith by trade, but had fallen on hard times.**

vi. Acts 9:3-8

vii. Both of Paul's traveling companions, Demas and Hermogenes, eventually renounce him and desert him (2 Timothy 4:10 and 1:15).