

## The Spiritual Journey of St. Paul

### Reflection #4: Paul, Success and Failure

Paul, Silas and Timothy went to Thessalonica in the early summer of 49, preached in the synagogue and made many converts. When the Jews became extremely jealous, Paul evangelized from a workshop, “working night and day”. The working classes in Thessalonica were attracted to the gospel message since they had a belief that Cabirus, a young man murdered by his brothers, would return to aid the poor and powerless. Paul’s preaching capitalized on their hope! The ruling class feared a revolution and Paul, Timothy and Silas, after a period of hiding, then left Thessalonica in 50 AD and sailed southward 480 kms. toward the ancient city of Athens (Acts 17:15).



Paul, frantic with anxiety over the Thessalonian converts who were being persecuted, sent Timothy and Silas back to Thessalonica to find out what was happening. He, meanwhile, waited in Athens for news as he recuperated from illness (1Thess.2:18) and walked around the marketplaces, observing the many statues to gods and touring, awestruck, their many magnificent temples. Aware of the glorious past of this sophisticated city, he spoke to the city council - the Areopagus - delivering a polished, well-crafted speech in which he referred to their monument to the unknown god (Acts 17:22-31). But at the mention of “rising from the dead” they laughed at him. Although he made some converts - a woman named Damaris and Dionysius the Areopagite who later became the bishop of Athens - Paul felt his failure bitterly.

As Paul trudged his way to Corinth, he had to re-think his mission and his entire missionary approach. Perhaps he had to get in touch with his “inaugural vision” - that experience of the Risen Lord’s personal love - that so transformed Paul’s life. Perhaps he had to recall the memory of the insight that had overwhelmed him, namely, that Jesus chose a horrible death - crucifixion - in order to show the depth of his love. Paul had to return to the center of his being and re-ignite the passionate flame of love that burned in his soul - the love of Christ crucified (1Cor.1:22-25). **WHAT SET JESUS APART FROM ALL OTHER TEACHERS AND PREACHERS WAS NOT HIS TEACHINGS OR MIRACLES, BUT HIS SELF-CHOSEN DEATH ON THE CROSS REVEALING THE DEPTH OF HIS SELF-SACRIFICING LOVE.** Paul’s failure in Athens taught him a very important lesson and helped him to set a clear direction for his future preaching: “to preach only Jesus Christ and him crucified” (1Cor. 2:2). (Fortunately, Timothy and Silas returned with the good news that the Thessalonians had remained faithful to Paul’s teaching).

A surprise awaited him in Corinth, a bustling city of trade, business, travellers, wealth-seekers, prostitutes. Here he met some Christians! A married couple, Prisca and Aquila, were Christian Jews, freed slaves who had become converts in Rome but had left that city in 41 AD. They were to become his most staunch friends and supporters. When Paul was treated with hostility in the synagogue, he decided to leave Corinth, but Jesus appeared to him with words of encouragement: “Do not be afraid. Go on speaking and do not be silenced, for I am with you. No one will attack you or harm you. There are many of my people in this city” (Acts 18:9-10).

Paul's first converts were well-to-do: Crispus, a distinguished, wealthy Jew; Phoebe of Cenchreae, a wealthy woman; and Erastus, a freed slave now in public office. The vast majority of his converts had been pagans. They were a heterogeneous, energetic, competitive group, anxious to work their way up in society and willing to work out their Christianity in practice. Paul continued to be supported financially by the women-led church in Philippi. When some Jewish critics of Paul brought him before the Roman consul, Gallio, in court (the bema) accusing him of trying to persuade people to worship God in a way that is against the law, Gallio dismissed the charge.

Paul and Timothy spent 18 fruitful months in Corinth, during which time Paul wrote the first of his famous letters, the Letter to the Thessalonians. At this time in his spiritual journey, Paul believed his generation would see Jesus return in glory and had apparently taught this to the Thessalonians. No wonder the Thessalonians became upset when Christian converts began to die before the return of Jesus! What would happen to them? This was the question they presented to Paul.

When Paul left Corinth, he took Prisca and Aquila with him, and together they sailed across the Mediterranean to Ephesus which would be Paul's home for the next two years.

Read: 1Thessalonians (all); 1Cor.1:31; 1Cor.3:5-9; 2Cor.10:17.

1. What "successes" do you cherish in your life and ministry?
2. How have you handled your successes?
3. What "failures" have you experienced in your life and ministry?
4. How have you handled your failures?



Hymn: "O Christ the Great Foundation" #527  
"Forth in the Peace of Christ We Go" #514



Read: 1Cor.2:1-5; Phil. 2:5-8; Phil. 3:7-11; Col. 1:20.

1. Can I identify a failure that brought about a major turning point in my life?
2. What "hidden gift" have I discovered deep within a disappointment?
3. What lesson or lessons have I learned from experiences of suffering?

Hymn: "Only This I Want" #516  
"When I Behold the Wondrous Cross" #382.

# 1 Corinthians 13 - A Christmas Version

Shared by Sister Teresita

If I decorate my house perfectly with plaid bows,  
strands of twinkling lights and shiny balls,  
but do not show love,  
I'm just another decorator.

If I slave away in the kitchen,  
baking dozens of Christmas cookies,  
preparing gourmet meals  
and arranging a beautifully adorned table at mealtime,  
but do not show love,  
I'm just another cook.

If I work at the soup kitchen,  
carol in the nursing home and  
give all that I have to charity,  
but do not show love,  
it profits me nothing.

If I trim the spruce with shimmering angels  
and crocheted snowflakes,  
attend a myriad of holiday parties  
and sing in the choir's cantata  
but do not focus on Christ,  
I have missed the point.

Love stops the cooking to hug the child.  
Love sets aside the decorating to kiss the spouse.  
Love is kind, though harried and tired.  
Love doesn't envy another's home  
that has coordinated Christmas china and table linens.  
Love doesn't yell at the kids to get out of the way,  
but is thankful they are there to be in the way.

Love doesn't give only to those  
who are able to give in return  
but rejoices in giving to those who can't.  
Love bears all things,  
believes all things,  
hopes all things,  
endures all things.  
Love never fails.

Video games will break,  
pearl necklaces will be lost,  
golf clubs will rust,  
but giving the gift of love will endure.