

## **Christians in a Time of Adversity**

### **A Photo Tour of Biblical Sites**

Carol and I had the opportunity recently to join a tour group from the seminary I work at and visit some biblical sites in Greece and Turkey. We didn't know when we signed up that we would be going in the middle of a global pandemic! There were lots of **people wearing masks**... particularly in the airports... and the longer we were there, the fewer places that were open. The president instituted a travel ban from Europe, but fortunately that didn't affect us as US citizens, except that many flights were canceled. Fortunately, we were scheduled to fly out of Istanbul, which is in Turkey, where the CoronaVirus is not very widespread and is not part of the travel ban, so we made it home okay.

We were checked out by the CDC when we arrived in New York and we are under a voluntary semi-quarantine... just to make sure we didn't pick up any bugs anywhere along the way, particularly in Greece, and we're not passing any of them along to any of you! So I can't do this in person today but I can show you some pics here and narrate them a bit for you, if you're interested. I posted a lot to Facebook while I was away, so if you saw any of those posts some of this may be a bit familiar.

First, a little context. Jesus was born, lived, died, and resurrected in **Israel** [map], in the bottom right hand corner of this map. I had a chance to visit Israel last summer, and gave a similar presentation on that. But most of the early Christians did not live there. Some did... there was a church in Jerusalem. But the gospel spread outside of Israel fairly early, to Jews who were living elsewhere in the Mediterranean world, and then to Gentiles... non-Jews... in those same locations. This was very controversial.. there were some who insisted that Christians needed to become Jews first, if they were to be in Christ.

One of the loudest voices in opposition was the apostle Paul. He was a Jew, but he had been raised in a Gentile world. He was from Turkey... except it wasn't called that then. It was the **town of Tarsus** [map], which you can see in the bottom right hand corner of this map of the Roman province of Asia Minor.

**The Roman Empire was very powerful during that time**... here's that map again... and one benefit of it was the entire area around the Mediterranean Sea was under their control, so people could travel from one region to another, or even move from one region to another, fairly easily. And so there were Jews everywhere in the Roman empire! Paul saw this opportunity to take the good news of Jesus to them, wherever they were... and then, as he was doing that, to also preach to Gentiles. He made a number of missionary journeys, and so did others... some of them with him and some of them on their own. And so he and his companions started a whole bunch of churches... gatherings of followers of Jesus... in the cities around the Mediterranean, particularly in his own homeland and in Greece.

Later, Paul and others wrote letters to some of those churches, do we know a little bit about them, even some of the names of the people, but mostly what they were dealing with. And the thing they were dealing with most was **adversity**. It was hard just living in the first century AD... sickness was prevalent and not terribly treatable, warfare was frequent and nasty, the weather could be hard, and you never knew when an epidemic or famine would strike. There was little safety net in society... it was a dog eat dog world to some degree. And it was hardest on those who had little power... which is one reason that

many slaves, poor people, women, and other marginalized people became Christian. The gospel was really good news to them!.. for a variety of reasons.

We visited the biblical cities of Athens, Corinth, Thessalonica, Philippi, Troas, Assos, Pergmon, and Smyrna. We also saw some other places where Christians flourished in the years after the New Testament... like Istanbul, which was known as Constantinople in those days. Most of what we saw from the first century was in ruins, but it was amazing how much of it was preserved. And the most common site, from city to city, was the remains of *temples*.

Not Christian temples, of course. Christians didn't have churches in those days. We saw no Christian church built before the third century. But we saw lots of temples to other gods, and I'm going to show you some of them. **These temples must have been awesome when they were new!** They're still pretty awesome in ruins, with their massive pillars and foundations. **Sometimes they carved the massive pillars out of a single block of stone!** And then they had to transport those things, and get them erected... and then put lintels and a roof on top of them!... all without cranes or any kind of power equipment. It would have been very, very expensive... and it showed their dedication to these gods and their worship.

Why? For the same reasons we have our own idols. That's what Paul and his companions called them.. idols... false gods. In our own time we don't build stone temples to Zeus but we have our own God substitutes...and for some the same reasons. Like the people of the ancient world, we don't feel like we have much control over our world, and we try to gain control over some piece of it through our addictions, our fantasies, our ways of manipulating others, the things we think we need just to be happy or sane. The ancient Greeks and Romans felt the same way!... they were human, after all. The reason for the temples was to win favor with the gods... whom they believed DID have control over the world. "If Zeus ain't happy, ain't nobody happy!" And so they would sacrifice and serve and even prostitute themselves or others to serve their gods, hoping that would cause the gods to interfere on their behalf and make their lives easier.

One of the saddest examples of this was in **Corinth [map]**. Every Greek town was built at the base of a hill, which they would turn into their "acropolis".. that's where they would build their finest temples and palaces and theatres, high on the hill, overlooking the city. **Corinth's acropolis was particularly awe-inspiring**...and on top of it was the temple to Aphrodite, the goddess of sexuality and fertility and prosperity. To serve Aphrodite in her temple were 1000 sex slaves... girls and boys both... mostly taken against their will. They would walk down from that great hill, **into the huge city of Corinth**, and offer themselves to whomever would want them... all for a donation to Aphrodite. It was demeaning, dehumanizing, and demoralizing.

And that's why the gospel was good news. The Christians in Corinth would welcome these sex slaves into their midst... and not use them. Sometimes they found enough money to free them from their slavery. They would treat them as equals, when it was scandalous to do so... because sometimes the very proper matrons of the church would be confused with the other women. The Corinthian believers were accused of all sorts of things that were not true about them... but also, being young in the faith, some of them struggled too, to do the right thing, to figure out what the right thing was to do. Paul

wrote to them to encourage them and instruct them in ways they should conduct themselves in this kind of adverse situation.

And Paul reminded both young Christians and others that God...the true God.. .doesn't reside in temples made by human hands... a good thing to remember ourselves at a time when we're not able to gather in a church building. The early Christians didn't need those!... because they themselves were the temple of God. **Paul said that while standing in this very spot in Athens...** what's known in Scripture as Mar's Hill, which is what the Romans called it... or the Aeropagus... which is what the Athenians called it. It was where the schools of philosophy would meet and debate ideas. **Here is Athens on the map.**

Paul was new in town, and he visited the Jews there to tell them about Jesus. And some Gentiles too. And he caused quite a stir!... his ideas were provocative in a town addicted to philosophy. So a bunch of the philosophical types invited him to climb up to the top of this prominent rock and explain more fully what he believed. From there, **you can see clearly up to the larger rock above it...** the acropolis of Athens... on which stood not one, but THREE temples. The most famous of those temples is called the **Parthenon**... that's the one to the goddess Athena. A lot of it is still left, but in Paul's day it was in good shape, and actively used.

And he stood on that lower hill and pointed to the other hill and proclaimed that the God does not live in temples made by human hands. And he told them that even they knew that God was better than that the stories they told about their gods... what we call classic mythology. Those gods were no better than humans... just more powerful! They had an inscription there to "an unknown god," so he told them about that unknown God, the creator of the universe, who had come to earth as a human named Jesus, to give them true wisdom from heaven. And many believed.

Another temple that was popular in that time period was this one in Pergomon. **Pergomon has a very high acropolis...** we went up there by bus and taxi on a very cold, very windy day, and thought we were going to be blown off the top of the hill. There's a couple of temples on the acropolis but it's the one down below, outside of town, that was the most interesting. It was in a whole complex dedicated to the god Aesclypus... the god of healing. This is where the famous ancient doctor Galen was from. People would come from all around to seek healing in this place. They would walk slowly through **this stone passageway** to soothe their spirits, to emerge into an open space where there were **mudbaths and a "sacred fountain,"** and a theatre. All of this probably didn't actually heal anyone, but it was a good spa treatment and probably made them feel a bit better at least!

Yet another temple that was very popular in ancient Greece was **this one in Delphi.** It was set high on a mountain side, and the legend was that one could go to Delphi and get one's future told. One a year a high priestess there, called an oracle, would go into the basement of this temple and emerge in a trance... and people would line up for miles to meet with her while she was in that trance and she would tell them their fortunes. They believed that this was a gift of the god Apollo, for whom the temple was built. They came from all over Greece, and Turkey, and Italy, and even France to hear the oracle of Delphi. Well, it turns out that the temple was built on a fault line, and escaping up through that fault line were poisonous, hallucinogenic gases... and so the oracle was in a drug-induced, not god-induced trance.

And that explains why the oracles kept dying within a few years of getting the job! They were being poisoned in their own temple!

The good news of the gospel, then, was that you didn't have to go to Delphi to find out your future... if you were in Christ, you were secure in his arms. You may not know the particulars about what would happen to you but, as Paul told the Philippians, **you could live life without anxiety**... knowing that God cares for you. You could be content in all circumstances, knowing that you already had everything you needed. And because of that, they won converts, such as Lydia in Philippi... the first convert in all of Europe...and so all of us who have European ancestors can thank her and Paul for introducing Christianity to Europe. **She was baptized here, in this very spot**, in a stream outside Philippi... and others, including our friends Hari and Penka in nearby Bulgaria, baptize believers here to this very day.

When Paul and his companions were in **Philippi [map]** they were followed around by a slave girl who had a demonic spirit that would also claim to tell the future... you see this emphasis on having some kind of power in an uncertain world? That spirit recognized Jesus in Paul. And kept yelling about it! "I see you, Jesus of Nazareth!" So Paul cast the demon out of the girl, which ticked off her owners, because they were making big money from her fortune-telling!... so many people in that world were slaves and taken advantage of by others. 😞 So they dragged Paul before the Roman military leaders in Philippi... **who met in this very room.**

Yes, it's just a floor now, with a little bit of walls, but 2000 years ago this was a very important place. It was on the edge of what they called **an agora... an open place**. Every Greek city had one of these. Sometimes the Bible calls it a marketplace, but it was more than that. This was a time when houses were very small and rough... most living was done outside, and most public living was done here, in the center of town. This is where couples met and flirted, where business was done, where speeches were made, where awards were given. And the military kept order. So Paul and Silas were dragged there, beaten for having caused disruption... there was nothing the Romans hated more than disruption, and thrown in prison. **Some think this was the very prison!** Some, including our tour guide, disagreed.

It wasn't the only time Paul got in trouble with the authorities. He was dragged before **this platform, called a bema, in the agora of Corinth**... and would have stood **right here, beside this pillar**... when the synagogue leaders complained to the Roman proconsul that Paul was, again, creating a disturbance. This time it didn't work. The proconsul, whose name was Gallo... and we have other archeological evidence to indicate exactly when he served there in Corinth... let Paul go.

Paul also got into trouble in **Thessalonica [map]**... and **here is its agora**... again, with the synagogue leaders. This time wisdom said that they should get out of town, so they left in the middle of the night. He later wrote two letters to the Thessalonians, reminding them to be faithful in times of adversity, because those times were never the end of the story. That God was truly in control and that God would redeem and restore all things in the end, including them.

Paul got to Greece from Turkey. He did his earliest missionary journeys there, and wanted to go into eastern Turkey but Luke, his traveling companion and author of the Book of Acts, said that the Spirit of Jesus prevented them. We don't know what that meant, but in the **town of Troas** in western Turkey...

near the site of ancient Troy... the place the Greeks had conquered 1200 years earlier **with a wooden horse**... he got a vision of a man from Macedonia saying, "Come over and help us."

Macedonia was in **northern Greece [map]**. That's where Thessalonica was. And Philippi. It's where Alexander the Great was from... his father was King Philip II of Macedon. It was a very famous place. So Paul and his companions got on a boat in Troas and sailed across the Aegean Sea and **landed right here**, in the port of what was then called Neapolis and is now the Greek city of Kevala.

We spent an evening in Kevala, and there had the opportunity to do dinner with **Hari and Penka Atanasov**, who drove two hours each direction from Kurdjili, Bulgaria, to connect with us. We had brought them some laptops, tablets, and money from you!... and they were very grateful. They lead our sister congregation there. They and the others in their network there are doing today what Paul and his companions did then... starting churches among the people of that region that we call the Balkans... introducing them all over again to the gospel of Jesus Christ.

And they need to do that in southern Bulgaria because that part of their country is now largely Turkish. **Turkey is right on their southern border [map]** and immigrants from Turkey have been moving to Bulgaria in large numbers, buying up old houses and moving into them, and then building mosques, often with money from the Turkish government. That's because Turkey is a Muslim country. You can tell so just by looking, because mosques always have a tower, or two, or even four, from which they call their faithful to prayer five times a day. It's called a minaret and is very much like a steeple on a church. **Here's what that call to prayer sounded like...**

But Turkey used to be different than most other Muslim countries. For centuries it was the home of the Ottoman Empire, which had conquered the Christian city of Constantinople, which had once been the second capital of the Roman Empire. In Constantinople was the world's most famous Christian church at the time... **the Hagia Sofia**... "holy wisdom." We got to visit it. It's still awesome and huge and beautiful, even as a museum. The Ottoman empire turned it into a mosque. But the Ottomans were a bit tolerant toward the Christian minority in their midst.

And when the Ottoman Empire fell apart after World War I, the modern republic of Turkey was created as a secular republic... sort of like the US, which was largely Christian then but respected all faiths. In recent years, however, under the current government, Turkey has become a bit more restrictive in its laws and a bit more boisterous in its relations with neighboring countries. We know a number of Christians from the US serving in Turkey but most of them can't say publicly that they're there, because it would be unsafe for them. They'd probably be kicked out.

And that's sad because Turkey was once such fertile ground for the gospel. You may know that the book of Revelation was written to seven churches in Asia Minor... all of them in western Turkey. The biggest and most famous of them is **Ephesus [map]**, which we didn't get to visit because we left the tour early. Paul wrote an awesome letter just to them, and another one to the Galatians... which were a collection of churches in the area around Ephesus. **But we did get to go to Pergamon, like I said, and Smyrna [map]** which are two of the others. And there were other churches in Turkey too, like the one in Colossae... and Paul wrote another letter to the Colossians. Please pray for the people of Turkey... for

the Christians there, for those serving there, and for the good people of Turkey to find again the good news of Jesus.

It's good to remember, though, that all of these churches in all of these cities were originally just handfuls of people...**and ordinary people too**. They weren't in charge. They weren't the majority. They didn't have power... other than the power of the Spirit in them. Just like us, they would get sick and every single one of them died. They had financial pressures and family challenges too, just like us. They lived in a time of real adversity... and their hope was not that by believing in Jesus all the adversity would disappear. In fact, by becoming Christians they usually ended up with more of it!

Rather, they believed that the good news of the gospel was that all that hard stuff didn't matter at all, compared to the eternal glory already at work in them. They believed in heaven, yes, but they also believed that heaven had come to earth, and that they were living in it, here and now... in peace and joy and love and amazing contentment... because their souls had the one thing they had needed most.

They didn't need Aphrodite to give them momentary sexual pleasure by using a slave boy or girl.

They didn't need Apollo to tell them the future.

They didn't need Asclipus to heal their bodies.

They didn't need Zeus to send lightning bolts from Mount Olympus.

They didn't need Alexander the Great, or the Roman Empire, or any powerful political figure to make the world better.

**They needed Jesus...** and Jesus had come to them. And all was well.

May the same be true for us!