

Wings

*“Those who wait on the Lord shall renew their strength;
they shall mount up with wings like eagles.”
Isaiah 40:31*



November 17, 2013

Strengthening the Disciples

Paul's missionary journeys were not entirely evangelistic. His method of working with his new converts holds several important—and surprising—lessons for our work today.

*“They returned to Lystra, Iconium, and Antioch, **strengthening the souls of the disciples**, exhorting them to continue in the faith” (Ac. 14:21-22).*

*“And he went through Syria and Cilicia, **strengthening the churches**” (Ac. 15:41).*

*“He departed and went over the region of Galatia and Phrygia in order, **strengthening all the disciples**” (Ac. 18:23).*

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When we think of Paul's three missionary journeys, we usually think of all the evangelism that was accomplished on those trips. But these three passages—one from each journey—reveal that Paul's missionary strategy was not “dunk ‘em and leave ‘em.” In addition to his evangelistic work, he always scheduled time for the work of strengthening the new converts.

This consistent pattern of behavior in Paul's work suggests three important lessons for our consideration today.

The most obvious lesson is that disciples *need* strengthening. These new Christians were spiritual infants, vulner-

able to all the temptations of the flesh and spirit the world could offer. They needed careful attention, and Paul could not leave them to sink or swim on their own. In fact, *all* of us need the encouragement of our spiritual peers, no matter how mature we may be in our faith. Christians who try to avoid the responsibility of working with fellow believers and go it alone are rarely successful in that quest. We need each other.

This points to a second lesson that is directed at church leaders: preachers, elders, teachers. Our task is not to make people feel better about themselves. Nor are we trying to turn them into Bible Trivia experts. Rather, our goal is to arm brethren with a broad knowledge of Biblical facts, instructions, and promises that will equip them to deal effectively with the daily grind of life. Our work must reflect that goal. We cannot assume that brethren will figure it out on their own, nor allow ourselves to be distracted by more trivial tasks.

A final lesson is hidden in the background of these episodes. Remember that while Paul was working with these

young churches, he was going through his own meat grinder of hardships. Paul's summary of his afflictions in 2 Cor. 11:23-28 makes our troubles today seem like nothing in comparison. Beatings, stonings, shipwrecks, robberies, hunger and thirst, false teachers and weak brethren—all these and more were routine experiences for Paul. It was a thankless work that would have driven a lesser man crazy. Here was a man who had every reason to throw up his hands and walk away from it all. But that's not what he did. Instead, he stayed busy helping others. *Paul found the strength to endure his own troubles by helping others deal with theirs.*

And that is perhaps the greatest lesson we can learn from Paul's example. All of us have our own issues in life that we must struggle with. We can respond with self-pity and complaining, but that will only create more negativity and depression. Or we can, like Paul, respond with a life of self-sacrifice and service to others. In doing so, we will find our purpose in life and the strength to finish the race.

— David King