



BELIEVERS CHAPEL

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The Sermons of Dan Duncan

Acts 14:1-28

Acts

"No Cross, No Crown"

TRANSCRIPT

[Message] Our text this morning is Acts 14 and I'm going to read the entire chapter, which is fairly lengthy, but I think we can do in about five minutes; probably not, because I'm going to make some comments as well, but I'm going to try to do so in a reasonably short amount of time.

But this is the middle of the first missionary journey. Paul and Barnabas have been in Antioch of Pisidian and now they've moved on to the city of Iconium, which is east of Antioch in southern Asia Minor, southern Turkey.

And we read in verse 1, chapter 14, "In Iconium they entered the synagogues of the Jews together, and spoke in such a manner that a large number of people believed, both of Jews and of Greeks. But the Jews who disbelieved stirred up the minds of the gentiles and embittered them against the brethren. Therefore they spent a long time there speaking boldly with reliance upon the Lord, who was testifying to the word of His grace, granting that signs and wonders be done by their hands. But the people of the city were divided; and some sided with the Jews, and some with the apostles. And when an attempt was made by both the Gentiles and the Jews with their rulers, to mistreat and to stone them, they became aware of it and fled to the cities of Lycaonia, Lystra and Derbe, and the surrounding region; and there they continued to preach the gospel.

"At Lystra a man was sitting who had no strength in his feet, lame from his mother's womb, who had never walked. This man was listening to Paul as he spoke, who, when he had fixed his gaze on him and had seen that he had faith to be made well, said with a loud voice, 'Stand upright on your feet.' And he leaped up and began to walk."

And I want to make a brief comment here, because if you have been following this series for the past number of weeks, that description of the healing of this man in Lystra will sound familiar. It's very similar to the healing that took place in chapter 3 when Peter healed the lame man at the gate called Beautiful near the temple. And I think the similarity is to be seen. I think it's by design. Luke wants us to recognize that, to show that Paul was doing the same work that Peter did. The same power that worked through Peter was working through Paul, that Paul was doing the work of an apostle just as Peter had done.

And the reason for that is because Paul, being a man who had come late to faith and to the ministry of the apostleship, who was not one of the 12, was a man whose apostleship was frequently questioned. In fact, it was questioned in this very region of Galatia. When Paul wrote the book of Galatians not long after this missionary journey had ended, what occasioned that was some men from Jerusalem, men who are called Judaizers, had come into that region and preached a different gospel. It was a gospel of salvation by faith plus works.

And they sought to undermine the gospel that Paul had preached, which was that of grace alone through faith alone by denying his apostleship. Paul was not a genuine apostle. He was not one of the 12, and so Luke seems to be making the point subtly but obviously that what Paul did in Lystra was the same thing that Peter had done in Jerusalem because he is an apostle just as Peter is. He did the signs of a true apostle.

Verse 11, "When the crowds saw what Paul had done, they raised their voice, saying in the Lycaonian language, 'The gods have

become like men and have come down to us.' And they began calling Barnabas, Zeus, and Paul, Hermes, because he was the chief speaker. The priest of Zeus, whose temple was just outside the city, brought oxen and garlands to the gates, and wanted to offer sacrifice with the crowds. But when the apostles Barnabas and Paul heard of it, they tore their robes and rushed out into the crowd, crying out and saying, 'Men, why are you doing these things? We are also men of the same nature as you, and preach the gospel to you that you should turn from these vain things to a living God, who made the heaven and the earth and the sea and all that is in them. In the generations gone by He permitted all the nations to go their own ways; and yet He did not leave Himself without a witness, in that He did good and gave you rains from heaven and fruitful seasons, satisfying your hearts with food and gladness.' Even saying these things, with difficulty they restrained the crowds from offering sacrifice to them.

"But Jews came from Antioch and Iconium, and having won over the crowds, they stoned Paul and dragged him out of the city, supposing him to be dead. But while the disciples stood around him, he got up and entered the city. the next day he went away with Barnabas to Derbe. After they had preached the gospel to that city and had made many disciples, they returned to Lystra and to Iconium and to Antioch, strengthening the souls of the disciples, encouraging them to continue in the faith, and saying, 'through many tribulations we must enter the kingdom of God.' When they had appointed elders for them in every church, having prayed with fasting, they commended them to the Lord in whom they had believed.

"They passed through Pisidia and came into Pamphylia. When they had spoken the word in Perga, they went down to Attalia. Frm there they sailed to anti, from which they had been commended to the grace of God for the work that they had accomplished. When they had arrived and gathered the church together, they began to report all the things that God had done with them and how He had opened a door of faith to the Gentiles. And they spent a long time with the disciples."

May the Lord bless this reading of His word. Let's bow in a word of prayer.

[Prayer] Father, we thank You for the great privilege we to gather together in this place as men and women who profess faith in Jesus Christ. And to be here together and open the scriptures and read the Bible, that is a privilege. It is Your inherent word. It unfolds to us truth that could not be known otherwise. You revealed Yourself to us through Your word. You've revealed ourselves to us in Your word. You've informed us of our condition, of our lost condition, of our weakness, of our need for You, of the solution to our problem in Your Son Jesus Christ.

We learn all that we need to know, Father. We are constantly of the fact that the scriptures are sufficient as we study through the Bible and we see how the apostles used it, how they proclaimed it, and how by means of Your word multitudes were brought to You, came to faith, trusted in Jesus Christ, and were changed.

And Father, we who have done that also bear witness to the fact that we are new creatures in Jesus Christ through no work of our own, but through Your good and sovereign grace, and we praise You and thank You for that and thank You for the occasion we have now this morning to study and to be built up in the faith, and we pray that that would be the result of our time together, that You would strengthen us and build us up, that we might be faithful and effective witnesses for You.

We're not placed in this world to enjoy life. You've given us much and we do enjoy much of life. That is because You are a good God who gives good things to Your people, but that's not the chief end of man. It is not to enjoy the world. It's to know You and enjoy You forever, and I pray that our time together would be to that end, it would cause that to take place in our lives and we'd be faithful servants this week.

Bless us to that end. We pray also for the material needs that we have. We pray You'd bless. We pray for those who are sick, those who

are recovering from medical treatments. We think of **Leana Grooms**. We pray for so often; we continue to do so. We pray for grace and healing and encouragement at a very difficult time in her life. We pray for **Ruth Ann Hooten** and pray that You would continue to give her healing, and for others as well, Father. We thank You for the baby girl that you've given to the **Lostrows**. We pray for **Elizabeth Grace** that you would bless her with health and bless her parents, that they might train her up in the grace and the admonition of the Lord and that we would see life in her.

We pray for our young people as they are returning today from Costa Rica. Give them safety. We pray that they would return well. We look forward to seeing them. We thank You for the privilege that they have had to go abroad and to serve You and to learn.

We thank You for the opportunity we have to do that this evening as we return to this place and celebrate the Lord's supper. Bless our meeting tonight. May it edify each of us. Bless those who participate. And we pray that we would worship well. We pray that we'll do that this morning, now, as we sing our final hymn. Use it to prepare our hearts and then open our hearts, Father, to receive the ministry that You have for us. We pray these things in Christ name. Amen.

[Message] I think it's probably true that most people like adventure stories. And Acts 14 can read like one. It gives the conclusion of Paul's first missionary journey and it does have its moments of high adventure. The reality is it was a hard trip. Luke skips a lot of details, but we can get a sense of what Paul and Barnabas must have undergone from the experiences of other missionaries. Samuel Zwemer and James Cantine spent years on the Arabian peninsula. They learned Arabic in Beirut; traveled from Baghdad down the mosquito-infested Tigris River to Busrah; they visited the hot, sweaty lice-infested ports and villages along the Arabian coast; they came down with malaria in Yemen. They had no servants to help. They had none of the modern conveniences that we

enjoy. The two recounted how they spent many nights reading Hebrew scriptures in Arabic by dim candlelight among the baggage and beasts of an Oriental inn. They slept on barges. They stayed on dirt-floor rooms in mud huts, and they were sick most of the time.

Well, those are the kind of details that Luke doesn't give us, but certainly were part of Paul and Barnabas' experience. It was a hard, grinding mission, and I mention all of that because we live in a time when Christians want things easy. An easy life and an easy, not-too-costly servant. Maybe that comes with affluence. We certainly live in an age of great wealth and all around there is materialism and the spirit of materialism. In fact, it has entered into the church and it makes people soft. It makes people unrealistic. They don't expect hardship. And when hardship comes, find it very difficult to face. They don't know how to face it.

There are a lot of false expectations in the church, and not just about life, but about ministry, a kind of triumphalism. We often hear people say things like, "We're going to win this city for Christ." I don't know if you've heard that said, but I have. In fact, last weekend the *Wall Street Journal* had an editorial in which it reported that a few months ago a large Protestant denomination stated its intention of bringing an army of 100,000 to take Chicago for the Lord. Well, they only got a few thousand to come and they didn't take the city. And I don't say that in order to criticize the effort or the desire. It's good, but where does the Lord tells us to take cities for Him?

When you trace out the pattern of the apostles, their ministry, they didn't win cities for Christ. They did divide cities over Christ, and they suffered persecution for it. Sometimes we have unrealistic expectations of what we're going to do. Samuel Zwemer writes of how they were thrilled with joy for weeks whenever they managed to convince an Arab to accept a copy of Scripture and take it home with him.

The Lord hasn't promised us a carefree life of easy victories or colossal conversions. Now, He can do that, He can provide that, He

can produce that, but He's the one who does it. We don't take or we don't win cities by our own effort. We can't plan or determine the result. And an unrealistic perspective or false hope eventually frustrates growth and effectiveness.

Christ does give us real hope. He promises us protection. He promises peace. He promises joy. He promises great blessing. He promises success of a greater kind than that which the world promises. The success that we achieving through obedience to Him has eternal blessing, eternal fruit, eternal reward. He's promised all of that, but He has also promised us a cross before a crown, hardship before heaven. The road to glory is not easy, and to walk it well calls for a realistic perspective. It calls for patience, it calls for perseverance.

We see that as we follow Paul and Barnabas down the road from Antioch to Derbe. It was a hard road that they traveled. They were driven from town to town. They've already been driven out of Antioch for preaching the gospel. They left it, a city divided over Christ, but with a vibrant, joyful church, a church that's filled with the Holy Spirit. And so they traveled east to Iconium, and as is their custom, we read in verse 1 that they entered the synagogue of the Jews and they preached the gospel with the result that a great multitude believed, both of Jews and of Greeks.

But again, Paul's preaching occasioned opposition from the Jewish community. It stirred up the Gentiles. They embittered them against the brethren, Luke writes. But it took a long time for the opposition to become serious, and so Luke tells us that they continued to preach the gospel freely and boldly for a long time. And the Lord confirmed the truth of their words, the truth of their preaching, by granting that signs and wonders by done by their hands; they did miracles.

These are what Paul describes in 2 Corinthians 12:12 as "the signs of a true apostle." They evidenced Paul's authority. They were the proof that what he taught was true. What he taught here is called the word of His grace. It's the word of God's grace. That's the gospel.

It's the message of forgiveness. It's the message that salvation is freely received through faith and faith alone. And many believed.

God gave Paul and Barnabas great success in Iconium. They left a deep impression on the people there that was not soon forgotten. That at least is suggested by a famous description of Paul preserved from the 2nd century that was given by a man named **Onessa Forest**, who was a residence of Iconium, and he wrote it in a book entitled *The Acts of Paul*, and there he describes Paul as short, bald, and bow-legged, but strongly built, with eyebrows meeting and nose somewhat hooked, full of friendliness, for sometimes he looked like a man and sometimes he had the face of an angel.

That's a famous description of the apostle. We can't be certain that it's authentic, but I am sure that Paul was a man who was full of friendliness. He was a man who must have had the face of an angel on many occasions. He was a man who was full of the Spirit. He was a man who showed these things in his appearance, in his conduct, in his words. He was a man who was gentle. He was a man of kindness. Above all, the apostle Paul was a man of the truth.

Still, in spite of all of that, in spite of his winsome personality, his friendliness, his kindness, in spite of that, he provoked opposition because the truth does that. And in verse 4 we read that the multitude of the city was divided. The gospel divides. It divides families. It divides friends. It divides whole cities. And the men of Iconium, both Jews and Gentiles, who opposed the gospel, plotted together to stone Paul and Barnabas.

But they learned about it in time. They left Iconium. They went to Lystra, about 20 miles southeast, and there Luke writes they continued to preach the gospel. That's what Paul did. Paul did not enter cities in order to perform miracles, to do signs and wonders. He did those to accompany the preaching of the gospel to support it, to demonstrate the truth of it. But principally what he did was enter cities in order to preach the gospel. That was the thrust of his ministry, because that is the divinely ordained way of bringing sinners

to an understanding of the Savior and bringing to a saving knowledge of Him - preaching. He did it wherever he went. He did it in season and out of season.

Lystra was no exception. It was a small rural community with so few Jews that apparently it didn't have a synagogue. I say that, because the normal pattern of Paul's ministry was to go to a city, and the first place he would go would be to the synagogue and there he would preach. It was a ready-made audience. People who knew the Scriptures - Jews and Gentiles who were God-fearers, who were proselytes, people who had converted to Judaism. They knew the Bible and he could take the scriptures, he could preach that to them.

But he doesn't go to the synagogue here, which suggests that there was not a synagogue. There was a small Jewish community, too small to have a synagogue, so instead Paul preached in the town square.

Luke writes in verse 8 that there was sitting there a certain man without "strength in his feet, lame from his mother's womb, who had never walked." In other words, he was thoroughly lame, and Luke is clear to make the point with the redundant description. He had no strength, he was lame from his mother's womb, he never walked. Very clearly this is a man who was a cripple.

But while Paul was preaching, he saw this man listening to him and he recognized, Luke says, that the man "had faith to be made well." Paul knew that the man believed his message and believed that Jesus, God's Son, could heal him by His omnipotent power. And to Paul stopped preaching and said with a loud voice, "Stand upright on your feet." He commanded the man to do the very thing that the man was not able to do. The man had never taken a step in his life. He'd never walked a foot and he could have said, "Well, I'm sorry, sir, but that's the very thing I can't do. I can't get up and walk."

He doesn't do that. He doesn't protest. What we read is Paul said stand up and the man leaped up and began to walk. And he did that because there is supernatural power in the gospel. God works through

the preaching of His word and that man became an object lesson of what Paul was teaching. He illustrated the truth of the change that takes place through faith in Jesus Christ, with the forgiveness of sins and the newness of life. So Paul had in this man a ready-made illustration of the very thing that he was talking about. What took place physically for him is what takes place physically for every man, woman, and child who believes in Christ as Savior.

His healing was a proof of the truth that Paul was preaching, and some must have believed. It's not recorded that they did, but we say that, because we read on, in verse 20, of disciples who are in the city. So some believed, but very few did. It's different from what is described in the other cities, in Antioch and Iconium. Many people came to faith; many people believed. But we come here to Lystra and not many do. We cannot predict what the results of the ministry are going to be. God knows that. He's the one that brings the results, for us to be faithful.

On this occasion, very few believed. People of Lystra were thoroughly pagan. They didn't have any Biblical understanding. So when they saw the miracle, they interpreted it according to their pagan knowledge and they began shouting, "'The gods have become like men and come down to us.' And they began calling Barnabas, Zeus," who was the supreme god of the Greek Pantheon; Jupiter is his name in the Roman Pantheon. And they called Paul Hermes, who was the messenger of the gods, or Mercury, because he was the chief speaker.

All of this went on without Paul or Barnabas' knowledge, because the people were shouting all of this in their Lycaonian language. It was a dialect that Paul and Barnabas did not know, and so they had no understanding of what was being said and so they allowed these things to go on as they did, until they met a procession moving toward them. It'd come from the temple just outside the gates of the city and the priest was leading this procession with an ox prepared for sacrifice. That's was when they learned that the priest and the people were coming to sacrifice to them. Paul and Barnabas were horrified. It

was superstitious and it was fanatical behavior, behavior that might be expected of illiterate pagans, but that can also be explained by a local legend that must have been very well known in this area.

In this legend, this story, Zeus and Hermes came to a valley knew Lystra. They came disguised as mortals seeking lodging in a local city. They asked a thousand homes for lodging and no one would take them in. Finally, they were offered help from an elderly peasant couple who entertained them out of their poverty and gave them a place to stay for the night. The next morning, the gods took this elderly couple up to a mountain and they turned around and they saw the gods had flooded the valley and drowned every inhabitant of it. And then they looked at their humble hut and they saw that it had been transformed into a glorious temple and they had been made overseers of it.

Well, as I say, the story must have been well known, so that when the people of Lystra, the people of this region, saw the miracle, they thought Zeus and Hermes have returned and they have come disguised as Barnabas and Paul. And so to avoid being unresponsive and suffering a second calamity, they worshipped them. So Paul and Barnabas were driven out of Antioch and Iconium as heretics, and here in Lystra they're received as gods.

It was the devil's work. It shows that he has a variety of ways to confuse and obstruct the truth. So Paul and Barnabas reacted to turn things around and away from that. They protested vigorously. Verse 14, "They tore their robes and rushed out into the crowd and said, 'Men, why are you doing these things? We are also men of the same nature as you, and preach the gospel to you that you should turn from these vain things to a living God.'"

Now that was very bold. It took a lot of courage to denounce the pagan religion as false, particularly in view of the fact that these are fanatical people. They're determined to worship these men as gods, and so it took a great deal of courage to do that, and it took a lot of character. This is the very thing that many people want - worship.

They want to be celebrities. They want to be the center of things. But Paul and Barnabas were different. Christ had made them new creatures and saved them from that desire. They rejected the temptation for what it was - blasphemy. It was all vain to them. They had no interest being worshipped at all. They said so. They rejected this. And then they began to preach. They were servants of the living, the true God "who made the heaven and the earth and the sea and all that is in them." That's a quote from Exodus 20:11.

But they didn't develop their sermon from that text or from any text of Scripture, as they would have if they were in the synagogue, but they were speaking to a different audience. They were speaking to pagan people, illiterate people who didn't know the Jewish scriptures. And so they drew upon natural revelation. Whoever spoke - and we might assume that it was Paul, because he has been the chief speaker, but whoever it was proclaimed the simple truth about God and used creation as his witness.

Follow the principles set forth in Psalm 19:1, "The heavens are declaring the glory of God." All nature is. And everyone, without exception, has an awareness of this. The reformers spoke of this as the seed of religion, which is the basic knowledge of God that everyone has, because we are all made in the image of God. We all have a sense of God, by nature, because of who we are. There is an unbeliever in the crowd if there's someone here this morning who has not believed in Jesus Christ. If you're an unbeliever, you know down in the depths of your heart that there is a God and you have a sense of right and wrong. You have what people call a sense of ought. You know that justice is right. In fact, people have a foreboding of the judgment to come. It's part of being in the image of God, and what is left of the image of God in fallen, sinful man perceives from creation an providence the reality of God, though that knowledge is not enough to save and in fact, always results in idolatry.

Paul makes that point very clearly in Romans 1:18-21. He says, "Men suppress the truth in unrighteousness." Well, Paul spoke to the

pagans of Lystra at that level, in terms of God as the Creator and the God of providence to awaken that truth which has been suppressed. Everything around these people witnessed to the living God. And Paul speaks of God's patience with the nations in verse 16.

And then in verse 17 he speaks of God's providence. "He did good and gave rains from heaven and fruitful season, satisfying your hearts with food and gladness." These people knew that. They had experienced the good hand of God. They'd experienced God's goodness from season to season, and this bears witness to the God whom they came to preach.

Now, none of this that they say is the gospel, but Paul's reference to the goodness and patience of God was intended no doubt to lead up to God's gift of Christ and His sacrifice. At some point we might assume that he spoke about that. But if he did, he did it with great difficulty, because read in verse 18 that "Even saying these things, with difficulty they restrained the crowds from offering sacrifices to them."

They denied that they're gods. They point to the true God, the one God who's given these people all that they have, and still these people are bent on worshipping them. And that would have continued perhaps, except for the change of circumstances. As Paul was speaking, his sermon was interrupted. Jews from Antioch and Iconium came to Lystra, and we read that they won over the crowds.

Antioch was about 100 miles away, so these were zealous Jews determined to stop the spread of the gospel. In fact, so determined that they made a long, hard trip in order to kill Paul. They almost did. The crowd that was so bent on worshipping Paul and Barnabas turned on them, "stoned Paul and dragged him out of the city, supposing him to be dead."

Now, there is a lesson in that on human nature, and the lesson is human nature is fickle. The people who were so enthusiastic about worshipping Paul quickly changed, just like people today do. Now they're attracted to one popular idea and they explore that for awhile

and then they're attracted to another idea. They move from idea to idea, movement to movement. Isn't that what Paul describes in Ephesians 4:14, being "tossed here and there by waves and carried about by every wind of doctrine"? That's human nature in and of itself. It's unstable. It doesn't have a grip on the truth and it moves from one thing to another. Apart from the grace of God, people don't have stability. They don't know the truth. It's the gospel that brings that. It's as we know the word of God, it's as we study the scriptures, that we are given stability in our lives. Our lives have a firm anchor, and so it's for us to do that, to apply ourselves to the scriptures, and God gives stability in life. That's what the word of God does. Miracles don't do that.

And that's another lesson from this incident, how shallow the response to miracles is without a response to the word of God. Now, I mention that because there is a lot of talk today about miracles. We should be doing miracles. We should expect miracles. In fact, there are those who say we can't do evangelism effectively unless we're not doing signs and wonders in great miracles.

But miracles don't change people. The Lord did many miracles. In fact, John tells us that all the books in the world could not contain all the great works that our Lord did. He did many, many miracles, and the people had faith in the miracles. They just didn't have faith in Him. And they rejected Christ. The word of God is what is necessary. That's what changes people. God works through the word of God. He works through the scriptures. The scriptures are sufficient to bring people to faith, to change them and give them growth in the faith.

Well, Paul was left for dead, but he wasn't. By a miracle he had only been knocked unconscious, and as the disciples were gathered around him, he got up. It's been said that we are immortal until our work is done, and God had much more work for the apostle to do, but it was down the road. And so the next morning they left Lystra, another city divided over Christ, and Paul dragged his battered body

down to Derbe, which was about a 60-mile journey southeast, and it must have been a hard one.

But that was life for an apostle. It wasn't an easy life. It was very difficult. As I was preparing my lesson, I came across a quote from an English congregational minister, a man who preached at the turn of the century, the turn of the 20th century. I'm still not sure if we're in the 21st century or the 20th century. But the end of the 19th, the beginning of the 20th century, J.H. Howett was a very well-known preacher, and he made a statement which I first heard quoted by Dr. Johnson some years ago and then I came across it again. Dr. Jowett said, "I once saw the track of a bleeding hare across the snow." That was Paul's track across Europe.

Paul knew what it meant to suffer for Christ. He later wrote to the Galatians, "I bear on my body the marks of Jesus." His scars were the proof of his apostleship. They were the proof of his devotion to the Lord and His service, and he bore them - scourging, stoning - Paul bore on his body the marks of Jesus.

Well, they arrived at Derbe, which was a frontier town of the Roman empire. And there the two missionaries did what they always did. They preached the gospel and God blessed the ministry greatly. Luke writes in verse 21 that they made many disciples. You never know what's up ahead. You can leave a rejection, even a stoning, and go down the road to a revival. And that can happen in the ministry. That happens in life for the Christian. We never know what blessing lies ahead. I have a friend who many years ago was working for a company which he did a very good job, but the company was downsizing, and so he walked into the office was given a pink slip. He'd lost his job. A few minutes later he walked down the hall, because he was told to go to the office of one of the other divisions in the company and he was given a new job and he prospered in that job.

One disappointment can merely open the door for another blessing. We never know what lies down the road for us. God is in control and we need to know that and we need to trust Him. He doesn't

call us to produce great results. He does that. What He calls us to do is be faithful to Him. That's what Paul did. He was faithful. And surprisingly, we read that He and Barnabas turned around and they went back to the very cities that had hounded them down to Derbe. They went back to Lystra, where Paul was stoned; they went to Iconium and to Antioch.

Now that took a lot of courage and it served as a great example to the young believers in each of those towns. They would not give up in the face of persecution. Winston Churchill's biographer described the statement that he made to the boys of Harrow School as his watch word. Churchill said to these boys, "Never, never, never, never give in." That could have been the apostle Paul's watch word: perseverance, courage. He never gave in. He pressed on in spite of the difficulties, and he face many, many difficulties in life.

That was the example that He and Barnabas gave to the churches by their return. But mainly they returned out of pastoral concern. In order to strengthen the souls of the disciples, as Luke says, they wanted these young believers to have a realistic view of the Christian life. It is not an easy walk. We should not think that it is. And so they told them in verse 22, "Through many tribulations we must enter the kingdom of God." Paul was a living illustration of that, as many others have been down through time.

Last week I mentioned Whitfield and Wesley and the great awakening, and how thousands of people went to hear them preach in the open fields there in England. In fact, Whitfield had a great ministry along the eastern seaboard of the American colonies. Thousands and thousands of people came out to hear these men preach, and many turned to Christ in those days, but many also rejected the Lord.

There was opposition not only from the church authorities, but from angry mobs. They would try to shout down the evangelists. They would pelt them with rocks. One of Whitfield's friends was a man name William Seward, who gave an account of his experiences while

preaching the gospel. Mr. Seward was a wealthy man, young man, but not a very gifted preacher, but he liked to do it and he would go with some of the men of that day who were very gifted evangelists, men like Howell Harris, who was a Welsh evangelist, and he would stand with them and he would preach for a while, and then these others would preach.

On one occasion he wrote of the experiences they had, the hardships they faced in one particular town. Mr. Seward preached, and while he did so, he was struck in the eye with a rock, had to be carried to an inn, and nursed. But the next day he and his friend went back to the town and preached, and he wrote of that. He said, "We had continual showers of stones, walnuts, dirt, a cat, and also a dead dog thrown at us. I was struck on my forehead and under my right eye again." Preaching the word of grace, as Paul calls it, brings opposition. Men would go out and preach a gospel of good works. They wouldn't receive that kind of treatment if they went out and talked about a gospel of self-esteem, how good we are, how wonderful we are in the eyes of God. That wouldn't cause any disturbance. But it's when you preach that men are dead in their transgressions and sins that everything we do, the best that we do, all of our righteousnesses are as filthy rags before God, that disturbs people. They don't like to hear that, and that provokes opposition. And that's what Paul experienced. That's what these other men experienced. As a result, it is through many tribulations that we must enter the kingdom of God.

There are two points to be made here. First, the normal Christian life will be accompanied by tribulation. We can expect that if we are witnesses for Christ. God did not choose and save us, as one of the old prophets said, so that we might be carried unto heaven on a bed of down.

It's true. We haven't been chosen to live an easy life. More than once the Lord told His disciples to take up their cross and follow Him. That's necessary. No cross, no crown. A life lived for Christ involves hardship. We are not exempt from difficulties as Christians, and we should not expect an easy life. If you're living an earnest Christian

life, if you're seeking to live for the Lord, to be obedient to His word, you can expect hardship and difficulty in this life. Trials will come and they may last a long time. We want an easy life, we want problems resolved easily, we find nice formulas that solve all of our problems, but that's not the way life is and it's not that way for the Christian.

There will be struggles and there will be disappointments. That's part of sanctification. That's part of the process that God uses to change us and make us like His Son. But the Lord's always faithful in the midst of that. We need to know that. Paul knew that. He knew that perhaps better than any man. He had occasions to doubt the faithfulness of the Lord. There was certainly an occasion to become disillusioned with the Lord after his stoning. You can imagine that after he and Barnabas escaped the stoning in Iconium that they left that town. They headed on south on the road, rejoicing that God had delivered them, and speaking to one another of God's goodness, His faithfulness to Him. Doesn't He love us? Hasn't He proven that by delivering us from such a terrible thing as being stoned?

And then in Lystra Paul falls into the hands of the very men he'd escaped and he could have questioned God's goodness and asked, "Lord, why did you deliver from a stoning in Iconium only to let it happen in Lystra? What was the point of that? There's no indication that Paul did that at all. He never questioned God. Just the opposite. He praised God and trusted Him in all things. He gives us his thoughts in Romans chapter 11, the thoughts that govern all of Paul's life. They speak to this very issue. The end of this great section of the book of Romans, he gives this doxology. "Oh, the depth of the riches both of the wisdom and the knowledge of God! How unsearchable are His judgments and unfathomable His ways! For who has known the mind of the Lord, or who became His counselor? Or who has first given to Him that it might be paid back to Him again? For from Him and through Him and to Him are all things. To Him be the glory forever. Amen."

We will sometimes have questions about the way life is and the twists and turns of it. God's ways are past finding out, but we should never doubt Him. We must always trust Him and know by faith, not by sight, but know by faith that His ways are always best of us. That's the life of faith. And I think that's the first point. We enter the kingdom of God through tribulations. Second point is the kingdom of God is still future. We haven't entered it yet. Every believer is a citizen of heaven. Every believer is a citizen of the kingdom, but the kingdom is yet to come. And we are to be living for it. We are like people in a foreign land. We're strangers in a foreign land. But if you ever have traveled abroad, if you've been to France or Germany, you are a stranger in a foreign land. You carry a passport of a different country. You don't live for that country. You don't pay taxes to that country. You don't invest in that country. You live in another land and you return to that land.

And that is the way it is with us in this world. This isn't our home. This isn't our country. We're not to live for this country that is invested in this world, invested in time. We're to invest an eternity. We're to be living for the kingdom to come, and whatever losses we suffer in this life and in this place, Christ will more than make up for them in the kingdom that will come.

Now, to do that, to live for the coming kingdom and do the work of the king today, churches need to be functioning effectively. It is a hostile world. Paul and Barnabas certainly knew that, and they wanted these newly established churches well equipped to function well. And so we read in verse 23 that they appointed elders for them. John Stodd has an interesting statement in his commentary on Ephesians. He observed that the leadership of these churches was both local and plural - local in that elders were chosen from within the congregation, not imposed from without; and plural in that the familiar modern pattern of one pastor, one church was simply unknown. It's unknown there. It's unknown throughout the New Testament. It's not taught. The pastor of the church is the Lord Jesus Christ, the great Shepherd of the

sheep, as the author of Hebrews describes Him. And it is to Him, Luke writes, that they commended them to the Lord in whom they had believed. It is His church. We can trust the Lord to pastor it well, to shepherd it well, to protect it, to guide it, as we look to Him by faith, look to Him in prayer, and are obedient to Him. Trust Him. Walk by faith in the Lord. Be obedient to His word.

Now, with this last bit of important business completed, the first missionary journey came to an end. Paul and Barnabas left Asia Minor and sailed back to Syria to Antioch from which they had been commended to the grace of God for the work that they had accomplished. Those are great works, "the work they had accomplished." It's a great thing to be able to say, "Mission accomplished." And they had finished the task that they had been sent to do, and so the church that had released them to that great mission gathered to hear their report. And what they told them was all the things that God had done with them and how He had opened a door of faith to the Gentiles.

Their report was all about God's work. The Holy Spirit, you'll remember from chapter 13, had sent them out. This was His mission. The Holy Spirit had opened doors of faith to the Gentiles. The Holy Spirit had brought them back safely. It is His work. It is God's work. He was with them from beginning to end and He gave success. The gospel is that. The gospel is all about God's work. He gives life. He gives it in regeneration. He gives righteousness. He gives a righteous standing with Himself through justification. He gives us godly character through the work of sanctification. From beginning to end, it is the work of God and He will glorify us. He who began a good work in you will perfect it until the day of Christ Jesus, Philippians 1:6. That's the gospel. He changes us into the image and the likeness of Jesus Christ.

But those changes in our lives don't come easily. We shouldn't expect them to. As we serve Him, we will experience hardship. We will experience opposition. We will have disappointments. Things may

not have the results as grandly as we would like them to. But the Lord will never disappoint us, and so we are to trust Him.

We do that, first of all, by trusting in Christ as our Lord and Savior, as the Son of God who died in the place of sinners, as the one who died in order that we might have His life. Have you done that? Have you recognized that you're a sinner in need of the Savior and that Jesus Christ is that Savior? He has paid the penalty and paid it in full.

If not, look to Him. Trust in Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of sins and eternal life. Only He can give that. He's the one to look to. Of yourself, you can't do that. You can't produce that of yourself. You're like that poor cripple in Lystra. He was physically helpless, unable to take a step, and you are just as helpless spiritually, absolutely dead in your trespasses and sins.

But multitudes have believed when the gospel has come to them. They found that they were able to rise out of their helpless condition, because God in His grace gives ability. So look to Christ. Believe in Him and you will find that you can do that. Receive Jesus Christ through faith, and in so doing, receive from Him forgiveness and everlasting life. May God help you to do that and help all of us to appreciate the life that He's given us and use it in His service. Let's pray.

[Prayer] Father, we do thank You for Your goodness and Your grace, and we're reminded of much in our text this morning. We're reminded of that grace. That's what Paul preached and it was through that preached word, through the good news of salvation in Jesus Christ that men and women, multitudes, believed and experienced the new life that only You can give. And we who have believed in Jesus Christ have done that as well. We thank You and praise You, because salvation is of the Lord. You've given us a new life, but it's clear from our text that it's not intended to be an easy life. You've not saved us in order to take us up into heaven on beds of down. We're going to live a

difficult life. But Lord, give us the grace to do that and give us the grace to use the time we have.

You have saved us and blessed with blessings that are beyond our comprehension. We will spend all eternity learning of that great grace with which You saved us. In the meantime, You have given us just a little bit of time in this world to serve You and serve You out of a sense of gratitude. May we do that and do that effectively. We pray these things in Christ name. Amen.