April 2, 2017
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Acts: “Eternal Perspective”
Acts 14:19-22

As we resume our journey through Acts, we will pick up the story in Acts 14:19-22. Please stand and let’s read our text together.

Let’s begin once again by looking at our map. Our text this morning actually includes many of these cities, so I want you to familiarize yourselves on the lay of the land.

If you recall, Paul and Barnabas began their journey in Antioch of Syria when they were commissioned by their home church to go preach the gospel to the nations. They sailed first to the island of Cyprus, then up to Perga in the region of Pamphylia, then up to Antioch in the region of Pisidia. Remember that while they were in Pisidian Antioch, many Jews and even more Gentiles came to have faith in Jesus, but there were many opponents of the Gospel who drove them out of the district. They fled Antioch and travelled down to Iconium in the region of Lycaonia, and once again, many people came to the Lord. However, almost inevitably, there was a mob that wanted to kill them in Iconium as well, so they travelled down to Lystra. In Lystra they had exactly the opposite problem then what they had encountered in Antioch and Iconium. Rather than wanting to kill the apostles, the residents of Lystra wanted to worship them! But not for long…

Luke reports in vs. 19, “But Jews came from Antioch and Iconium, and having persuaded the crowds, they stoned Paul and dragged him out of the city, supposing he was dead.”

Luke says a lot in this one sentence. First, notice that the persecution against Paul is driven by zealous Jews. Now these are VERY zealous Jews because many of them have walked a long ways…all the way from Antioch which is over 100 miles…to find Paul and to kill Paul. Along the way they meet up with more zealous Jews from Iconium who also want Paul dead, so by the time these persecutors show up in the city of Lystra, they are large in number, powerful, persuasive, and ready to throw some stones.

Take a moment to note the irony here: remember that Paul was once a zealous Jew that walked many miles to track down Jesus-followers and have them arrested or even executed. Remember that Paul was a participant in the stoning of the Jesus-follower named Stephen. Now, the shoe is on the other foot. The former hunter has become the hunted.

Note also how the residents of Lystra who were recently inclined to worship Paul are now easily swayed into believing that Paul is a threat that requires extermination. We can’t help but see
some parallels between this story and the story of Palm Sunday, right? In both cases, adoring crowds turn into murderous hordes within a matter of days.

Listen: crowds are fickle. The most adoring crowd can be turned into a murderous mob when the right lies are whispered in the hallway. Ask any middle-school girl…

Notice how Luke sums up this situation with minimal detail. There is no record of any debate or dialogue between Paul and his persecutors and/or the citizens of Lystra. We’re left with the impression that the persecuting Jews didn’t have to work very hard or very long to sway the crowds to their point of view, even though Paul had healed a crippled man right before their very eyes. Miracles apparently have a short shelf-life…no matter how powerfully God has moved, people are inclined to believe what they want to believe.

Now…where is Barnabas in this part of the story? Why do they only stone Paul? I can’t answer that question; Luke doesn’t give us an answer. I think we must assume that Barnabas was not to be found that day for whatever reason. He may have gone to a neighboring village or even been stuck in bed with the flu. Whatever the case, the angry mob turns on Paul, and Luke reports that they stoned Paul, then dragged him out of the city and left him for dead.

According to Lev. 24, stoning was the just penalty for blaspheming God, which is what these Jews would have accused Paul of doing by stating that Jesus was God’s Son. The irony, again, is that these zealous Jews are convinced, as Paul once was, that they are serving God by killing Christians. How often have we seen that situation throughout history?

Now, to stone a person to death consisted of exactly what it sounds like: a group of men would circle or corner the one condemned, and they would hurl stones at the person until he/she died (if you’ve been to that part of the world, you know that stones are readily available pretty much everywhere!). I suspect in most cases, the mortal stone would be the one that crushed the skull of the victim causing severe brain hemorrhaging and death.

Luke reports that after they stoned Paul, they “supposed he was dead” and dumped his body just outside of the city. Now, think about that for a moment. If you had walked over 100 miles to execute a heretic, do you think there is any chance that you are going to turn around and walk 100 miles home without ensuring that the dude you came to kill is actually dead? The verb Luke uses here literally means, “They thought or assumed he was dead.” So here’s my question: was Paul dead and then brought back to life? Or was Paul simply knocked unconscious for several minutes? We can’t say for sure, but I personally think he may have been dead for a few minutes and then brought back to life by God, and I have three reasons for thinking that.

The first is that those experienced in the art of stoning would have been competent in discerning the difference between a person who was dead and a person who was knocked unconscious.
Think about it—it stands to reason that those getting stoned would almost always get knocked unconscious first, so those doing the stoning likely saved a very large rock to finish the job once the person was knocked unconscious to ensure that the person was actually dead. I know that’s graphic, but it makes sense, right?

Secondly, Paul reveals in 2 Corinthians 12:3 that he had an experience of being taken up into paradise, which was considered the “third heaven” where God is on the throne. There he learned great revelations, some of which he was instructed never to share with anyone. According to Paul, by the time he writes of it to the Corinthians, the event was 14 years old, which could potentially date back to his first missionary journey and this episode in Lystra. In other words, it’s possible that Paul was referring to this “near death experience” to the degree that his spirit left his body (he died), he was in heaven for a time, and then God sent him back. We’ve heard stories like that throughout the ages, and it would explain why the angry mob was convinced he was dead…because when they checked, Paul was dead…at least for a few minutes.

Thirdly, I think it’s also significant that when the disciples gather around Paul’s broken and dead body, he suddenly opens his eyes, gets up, and walks back into Lystra on his own power. Look at vs. 20, “But when the disciples gathered about him, he rose up and entered the city…” Again, for a man who was just pummeled by countless rocks, it seems highly unlikely he would be walking unless God sent his spirit back into his body and also restored his body to some degree in the process. Whatever the case may be, Paul survived being stoned, which certainly qualifies as a miracle!

Now…let me ask you this: if you were stoned and left for dead by an angry mob from the city of Lystra, where is the LAST place you would go should you survive said stoning? LYSTRA, right? But notice, Paul gets up with the locals who had given their lives to Christ, and he leads them right back into the city. Can you imagine that? I suspect the angry Jews from Iconium and Antioch had already left town on their way back to their homes, but can you imagine the stares and astonishment of the locals in Lystra when Paul…who they had left for dead…strolls back into town with his little band of disciples? For all intents and purposes, Paul walks back into town as one resurrected from the dead! If they thought he was a god before, imagine what the tribal people of Lystra are thinking now! Surely they are fearing for their lives, for this god/man with great power will surely wreak revenge, right? Wrong. Paul walks back into the company of those who tried to kill him…not to seek revenge…but so that even those who tried to kill him might hear the Gospel and be saved. Now where did Paul learn that kind of behavior? From his King, right? Jesus died and rose again, and returned to the city of His death…not in revenge…but to save those who had Him crucified. Time and again we see this pattern in the New Testament: those who follow Jesus will experience what Jesus experienced, they will do what Jesus did, and they will see the power of God accomplished in their living, in their dying, and in their resurrection!
Let’s pick up our story beginning with the second part of vs. 20, “…the next day he went on with Barnabas to Derbe. When they had preached the gospel to that city and had made many disciples, they returned to Lystra and Iconium and to Antioch.” Let’s look at the map again for just a minute (show map). You can see that Derbe is about 60 miles west of Lystra, which in the ancient world was at least two if not three days of walking. I can only imagine how long it took Paul to limp 60 miles the day after he had been stoned and left for dead!

Luke states that Paul and Barnabas preached the gospel and made many disciples there, but did you notice that Luke doesn’t speak of any opposition to the gospel in Derbe? That’s rare…really rare, but isn’t it nice to know that it’s possible! So why so much opposition in Antioch, Iconium and Lystra…but none in Derbe?

I can’t help but wonder if the apostles’ amazing success in Derbe was attributable to the obvious brutality Paul had endured in Lystra. Think about that for a moment. In Lystra, Paul declared the gospel from a posture of good health, sharp intelligence, and the power of God working through him that led a crippled man to be healed. His sincere desire was to point people to God, but what happened? Instead of worshipping God, the citizens of Lystra saw all that power and charisma and decided to worship the messenger.

But in Derbe, when the listeners see the gospel presented by a bruised and beaten man, when they hear the testimony of a person who suffered stoning and then limped 60 miles to tell them about Jesus, they’re not inclined to worship the messenger. They worship the One to whom the messenger bears witness to. And given his suffering and weakened state, the gospel creates no anger, no hostility, and no opposition.

Let me ask you a question: who are you more inclined to believe? The one who has suffered little for his convictions, or the one who has suffered much? The one who wields great power, or the one who demonstrates great faith when she is powerless?

Paul will later write in 2 Cor. 12: “But the Lord said to me, ‘My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness.’ Therefore I will boast all the more gladly of my weaknesses, so that the power of Christ may rest upon me. For the sake of Christ, then, I am content with weaknesses, insults, hardships, persecutions, and calamities. For when I am weak, then I am strong.”

Where did Paul develop that theology and perspective of missional strength through personal weakness? I suspect his experiences in Lystra and Derbe played a significant role.
Now notice something else here. Paul and Barnabas are about ready to be done with their mission trip. Paul has been beaten to a pulp, and they’re ready to head home. The shortest route home from where they are now is to walk just over 100 miles southeast from Derbe to the port in Tarsus where they can grab a ship and sail straight back to Syria. Not only is that the shortest way back, it’s also a golden opportunity for Paul to drop in on his family and friends there in his hometown of Tarsus. Amazingly, however, that’s not what Paul and Barnabas decide to do.

Look at vss. 21-22: When they had preached the gospel to [Derbe] 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 that through many tribulations we must enter the kingdom of God.

You gotta love these guys. Paul and Barnabas recognize the need to circle back, so they add hundreds of miles to their trip to circle back and provide three things for the new believers in each town: strength, encouragement, and eternal perspective.

First, they strengthen the souls of the disciples. We know from Paul’s letters what Luke is referring to when he writes of “strengthening the souls of the believers.” Paul and Barnabas will teach them more about Jesus and the power of the gospel. They will reinforce their faith by helping them to understand the scriptures, teaching them how to pray, how to live a life of obedience, how to take care of each other, how to hold each other accountable, how to forgive one another. Later Paul will write these churches a letter of encouragement and instruction, and that is the book in the New Testament known as “Galatians.”

Next, Luke states that the apostles “encouraged them to continue in the faith.” All believers need encouragement to keep going…to keep walking…to finish the race. Listen: faith is hard…life is hard. Anyone who sincerely desires to follow Jesus will go through very difficult trials and temptations…we need encouragement to continue in the faith. We know Barnabas was a very gifted man of encouragement…his name literally means, “Son of encouragement.” Make no mistake: the role of a Kingdom encourager is every bit as important as one who teaches or preaches or evangelizes. I am blessed by many of you who have the gift of encouragement, and I strongly encourage all of you as Jesus-followers…surround yourselves with those who can bring encouragement into your life and your faith. We can’t walk this road very long or very well without encouragement.

Finally, the apostles provide eternal perspective for the new believers. They teach them a sobering truth: “through many tribulations we must enter the Kingdom of God.” The way that sentence is structured makes it more confusing than if we move the prepositional phrase to the end. Then it reads this way, “We must enter the Kingdom of God through many tribulations.” Which is to say…there is NO OTHER way to enter into the Kingdom of God. Jesus said in
Matthew 7 that the road that leads to destruction is wide and easy, but that the road that leads to life is narrow and hard. That’s not a threat, it’s an observation…and it’s true. We don’t ever enter into the Kingdom of God playing it safe. You want to know why? Because if we are following Jesus, we are going to follow Him into the hard places, the dangerous places, the places of great need, the place where we will be opposed, ridiculed, and hated…we will follow Jesus into those places where tribulations are sure to come because it is in those places that we bear witness to those whom Jesus died to save. Which is to say, if we never face any tribulations due to our faith, we’re probably not following Jesus where He is leading us.

I know that’s harsh, but listen: I didn’t write the Bible. I’m simply being faithful to what the text says very clearly. And no, I don’t believe this verse is limited to an ancient context of persecution because I have seen firsthand the tribulations that come with following Jesus. I have seen them in my own life, and I have seen them up close and personal in the lives of many Jesus-followers in many places around the world. Tribulations…troubles, persecution, and suffering…these tribulations make us weak so that in our weakness, people see Jesus. That’s how it works more often than not. You may argue for an exception, but you will find no such exceptions in the New Testament.

Listen: better for Paul and Barnabas to speak the truth in love about the reality of tribulations as the pathway into the Kingdom, than to lie to us and tell us that if we follow Jesus, we will be healthy and wealthy and hugely popular. I’m not slamming health or wealth or popularity by the way…I’m just saying this—the path that leads to the Kingdom of God is one of many tribulations, and if we hope to enter into the Kingdom of God, we must go THROUGH the tribulations…not around them. We must go through the hard times, not avoid them. But consider this perspective as well: on the other side of tribulations, awaits the KINGDOM OF GOD! That’s good news, right? There is a light at the end of the tunnel…there is an eternal reward that awaits us…there is a new heaven and a new earth…there is joy that comes in the morning…there is home.

But here’s the real encouragement that all of us need to remember…the road through tribulations though hard, is not a road we walk alone…we are never alone. There is One who walks that road with us; He is good, and He strong. He is our Shepherd; His rod and His staff bring comfort as we journey through the dark valley of shadows. He is the Light in the darkness, and He bids us look to Him, gaze upon Him when all seems hopeless, and there we will find the strength we need to press through the tribulations into the Kingdom of God. Believers have given testimony throughout the centuries that He is there in the dark night of the soul…He can be trusted in the tribulations. We must only turn our eyes upon Jesus.
1. O soul, are you weary and troubled?
   No light in the darkness you see?
   There’s light for a look at the Savior,
   And life more abundant and free!

   o Refrain:
      Turn your eyes upon Jesus,
      Look full in His wonderful face,
      And the things of earth will grow strangely dim,
      In the light of His glory and grace.

2. Through death into life everlasting
   He passed, and we follow Him there;
   O’er us sin no more hath dominion—
   For more than conqu’rors we are!

3. His Word shall not fail you—He promised;
   Believe Him, and all will be well:
   Then go to a world that is dying,
   His perfect salvation to tell!