

Pressing on Together, Counting the Cost

September 6, 2020 AM

Covid, Back to School, first Sunday of September

Acts 14

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Dear Church family,

The words that jumped out at me as I first read this chapter were “poisoned minds.” Did you catch that in v.2?

The chapter starts off saying how a great number of Jews and Greeks in Iconium believed the gospel as Paul and Barnabas preached it. People in large numbers turned to Jesus. This church in province of Galatia started bursting at the seams. New life pulsed through the town. The city square was buzzing with the news of conversion of all sorts of people. Both Jews and Greeks listened to Paul and Barnabas and believed the gospel.

That’s v.1. But v.2 suddenly changes the picture. We read,

Acts 14:2 ...the Jews who refused to believe stirred up the Gentiles and poisoned their minds against the brothers.

Poisoned their minds! Those words weren’t chosen randomly. Why didn’t Luke just say, “Some Jews stirred up trouble and turned people against Paul and Barnabas”? He talks about poisoning minds because he wants us to get the picture that lies are being told. Lies go into our minds and create fear which can move people to action, in a way that truth sometimes can’t. Fear can rouse people up into hostility even.

“Poisoned minds” made me think of the book and movie *The Help*. I love that story. The author does such a great job of exposing the ugly face of racism for the serious issue that it is but sprinkles in some amazing humor which makes the movie “seriously delightful.” The story is set in Jackson, Mississippi in 1963, the year I was born!! In that place, white families hire black women as domestic workers or maids and call them “the help”.

Skeeter Phalen is the daughter of one of these white families who has a deep, deep love for the maid who played a bigger role in raising her than her own mom. She loved the maid more than her own mom in some ways because the maid taught her what love really is.

As a young adult, Skeeter is trying to break into journalism and wants to use writing to help expose and break down racism in her own town. It’s dangerous work because the whites resist losing their hold on power to black folks. So spreading lies about black people becomes the tool of choice for insecure white people. “Don’t trust the blacks. My maid stole my silverware! I fired her. Don’t give her a job. She’s not worthy. Let her starve to death so she knows you can’t get away that.” With such lies, a white boss would seek to poison the minds of other whites in order to keep power in the hands of white people by stoking greater fires of hatred and distrust of the blacks.

That sort of thing is still happening today. And something very similar is happening in Iconium in Acts 14. The Jews who held power in the city are poisoning the minds of the Greeks in order to help them battle the growing influence of the Christians. We aren't told exactly what poison is being used but you can only imagine: "Hey, Socrates, my Greek friend, some of us Jews were listening to a group of those new Christians and they were saying that Greeks are bunch of pagans. That's just terrible! But more than that, they are saying that Caesar isn't our king. Jesus is! We're pretty sure they are going to revolt against Rome pretty soon. We have to stop them. We want to help you stop them." The poison is strategically placed, just like you would put mouse poison down in places where you know it can do the most damage. It's all intended to kill the enemy, whether that's a mouse, a Christian or anyone else. In Iconium, the words were carefully chosen and dropped strategically like poison. That's Luke's message.

Hardship is Expected

Along with that, Luke makes it clear that in the early church hardship is expected. In fact, it was part of the discipleship training that Paul and Barnabas gave in the churches they planted and nourished! Listen again to the words at the end of Acts 14, starting in v.21:

Acts 14:21 They (Paul and Barnabas) preached the good news in that city (Derbe) and won a large number of disciples. Then they returned to Lystra, Iconium and Antioch, ²² strengthening the disciples and encouraging them to remain true to the faith. "We must go through many hardships to enter the kingdom of God," they said.

They had learned this lesson in the school of hard knocks! Paul and Barnabas weren't part of the original 12 disciples, but I suspect that had been told by the 12 what Jesus had told them about suffering for the sake of following him. He told the 12 in John 15, for example,

John 15:18 "If the world hates you, keep in mind that it hated me first. ¹⁹ If you belonged to the world, it would love you as its own. As it is, you do not belong to the world, but I have chosen you out of the world. That is why the world hates you. ² Remember what I told you: 'A servant is not greater than his master. 'If they persecuted me, they will persecute you also. ...'"

Certainly, by this point in their missionary journey and experience, Paul and Barnabas discovered that hardships come with the territory. They faced opposition in nearly every city they visited. In our reading, Paul is even stoned and left for dead.

That doesn't faze him, though. Clearly, they had learned that there's something beautiful about pushback, resistance, opposition and hardships. Their fellow apostle Peter would later say,

1 Pet 4:12 Dear friends, do not be surprised at the fiery ordeal that has come on you to test you, as though something strange were happening to you. ¹³ But rejoice inasmuch as you participate in the sufferings of Christ, so that you may be

overjoyed when his glory is revealed. ¹⁴ If you are insulted because of the name of Christ, you are blessed, for the Spirit of glory and of God rests on you.... ¹⁶ ...if you suffer as a Christian, do not be ashamed, but praise God that you bear that name.

Suffering for the apostles was a badge of honour. Praise God that you are in the company of Jesus who also suffered.

I don't think that message resonates too well with us in the western world today. Whether it's spiritual opposition in our context today or just suffering in general, we tend to face it with a negative spirit, rather than praise God for it. We don't like hardship. And I get that. We tend to think it's not consistent with being a Christian. We have so many health and wealth preachers in our world that try to tell us that following Jesus means we have life handed to us on a silver platter. We just have to name it and claim it in the name of Jesus. I'm sure the apostles like Paul and Barnabas would be appalled at that message. I've seen conflicting reports that even Benny Hinn has rejected that false gospel now. I hope that's true because that is not the teaching of Jesus nor his disciples. Clearly, Paul and Barnabas have a very different message for the churches they discipled. "*We must go through many hardships to enter the kingdom of God,*" they said.

I don't think we have the ability to determine God's purposes in this pandemic. We hear people saying things like, "This is God's punishment on our sinful world!" We have no way of reading the mind of God, other than what he has clearly revealed in the Bible. However, during this pandemic or any other struggle, we don't have to face the hardship with pessimism. Covid-19 is not religious persecution, to be sure, but it is physical hardship just the same. Whether it is explicit persecution for our faith or suffering in general, we can have the same confidence that Paul and Barnabas had in knowing that the Lord is in it. Hardship is to be expected in this life!

Hardship for Our Good

As Christians, what we need to understand is that our God uses hardship for our good or the good of his kingdom. We go through pandemics maybe once in a lifetime. But we go through other struggles in life all the time. Remember, though, nothing comes as a surprise to our Lord. He's way ahead of us. He's working through all sorts of struggles to shape and mold and strengthen us so that we become more and more conformed to image of Jesus.

This is what those apostles are suggesting to us when they say, "*We must go through many hardships to enter the kingdom of God.*" They aren't saying that hardship is required for salvation. That's not what is meant by entering the kingdom of God. We are saved entirely by faith alone in Jesus' finished work for us on the cross and through his resurrection! Hallelujah! Don't question that!!

Hardships help us enter more fully, more deeply into the life of God's kingdom, a life that is about sacrifice but, more importantly, a life that is about living closely to Jesus

who suffered much for us. As we struggle through hardships, we find that we cannot live without fellowship with our beloved Lord Jesus. We seek him wholeheartedly. We hunger and thirst for him. We discover that he is all we want and he is all we need. Even more, we find that Christ is close by! Dearer than our dearest friend!

I have said many times since going through the near death of our daughter Rachel and the grueling months of her recovery, this was the worst of times and the best of times. It was the hardest time of our life in terms of the struggle. At the exact same time, however, there has never been a time when Jesus was closer to me. It was in the struggle that I sought him so much and discovered he was what I needed most and wanted most.

John Calvin wrote in his commentary on this verse from Acts 14:
For though God handle some men more courteously and gently, yet doth he pamper none of his so daintily that he is free from all tribulations.
Paul and Barnabas taught that God's people will face all kinds of tribulations or hardships. Whether it's persecution or something else, we are assured that kingdom work is happening in our lives.

The child's song, "Row, row, row your boat" says, "Merrily, merrily, merrily, merrily, life is but a dream!" I'm not so sure that's true! Sometimes life can feel like a nightmare! Struggles can be overwhelming almost. All of us have endured some sort of hardship and know the struggle to different degrees. Paul and Barnabas discovered and shared with their churches that struggles are God's way of bringing us into a fuller experience of the kingdom. Tough times refine and even beautify us.

Nature itself teaches us this spiritual truth. I read this week:

People talk about caterpillars becoming butterflies as though they just go into a cocoon, slap on wings, and are good to go.

Caterpillars have to dissolve into a disgusting pile of goo to become butterflies.

So if you're a mess wrapped up in your blankets right now, keep going.

Paul and Barnabas declare to God's people, "Keep going! Yes. But even more, keep trusting the Lord to be at work in your life in whatever circumstances you endure!" My friends, it's not purposeless. You are not a caterpillar becoming a butterfly. You're something greater. You are a child of God, redeemed by Christ and being conformed more and more into his image or likeness. You are learning to lean on him more fully. You are coming to realize more completely that in him is life and life to the fullest! This is the fullness of kingdom life that comes through hardships very often. We shed our self-reliance or sin and rest more fully in Christ and even become more like him.

Remember this old hymn "Am I a soldier of the Cross"? One verse reminds us,
*Are there no foes for me to face?
Must I not stem the flood?
Is this vile world a friend to grace,
To help me on to God?*

This world is not going to help us on to God. But God working through the hardships that come to us is most certainly our friend to grace! In that way, hardship is for our good.

Hardship Doesn't Have the Last Word

So, we can say confidently as believers, hardship does not have the last word! Hardship doesn't define us as God's children and doesn't claim us as victims. It does not have the last word. God does!

Hardship didn't have the last word in the life of God's child Joseph! You remember his story, I'm sure. Thrown in a well by his jealous brothers. Sold as a slave to Egypt. Betrayed by Potiphar's wife and thrown back into prison. Through it all he continued to trust the Lord. And God raised him up to become the savior of his family and the future nation of Israel. Joseph began to look a lot more like Christ when he said to his brothers years later, "You intended to harm me, but God meant it for good—for the saving of many."

You remember Job too. A man who lost everything—children, cattle, wealth. But he didn't give up on God. He argued with him at times. He wondered. Questioned. But in the end, the Lord strengthened his faith, made him more Christ-like, restored him and gave him to us as an example that hardships don't have the last word. He's a picture for us of God's redeeming and recreating work in us through Jesus.

Then uppermost is our Lord Jesus himself. He set us an example of entrusting our lives into the hands of the Father on the throne of this world. Our Lord Jesus left the glories of heaven; he humbled himself for us. He took on sin, sorrow and suffering to the greatest degree possible. He exemplified kingdom life. He was all about the kingdom. His suffering accomplished a wide-open door for us to enter the kingdom of God. Now we can live in the assurance that our life is important and purposeful to God and his kingdom. He loves us and will work all things together for our good.

That doesn't mean our hardships melt away. We still have to deal with the realities and pain. However, we can face things like this pandemic with confidence that God has got this. We can return to school with such confidence. We can go about our daily tasks with such confidence. I'm not saying we have to forget government protocols for our safety during the pandemic. Of course not. But we don't have to live in fear. We don't have to believe lies or allow our minds to be poisoned by fear mongers. The world is securely in the hands of our Father in heaven. We are securely in his hands because of Jesus.

We can live in the confidence that whatever hardships we must endure, they will not have the last word. Jesus is the Word of God and in him our life is eternally secure. In him, our lives are purposeful and important. So we can surrender our days to our Lord's service and live in "trusting-fellowship" with him. Friends, no matter what we must go through, let us live life for the kingdom of God, not for self-fulfillment or anything less than God's good purposes.

As we do, we bear witness to the world—just as the apostles did—that Jesus is our Lord. He gives us peace, like Paul and Barnabas had as they endured violent opposition. He gives courage and confidence, as Paul and Barnabas displayed and preached in every town they entered throughout in Acts 14. Dear friends, I am—and I hope you are as well—encouraged by the strength and faith displayed and declared wherever Paul and Barnabas went. That confidence came from the presence of Jesus with them. So, he is with us in our time and we can bear witness that he is our peace, our joy and our ever-present help in times of trouble!

Let us encourage one another with this comfort even as Paul and Barnabas encouraged the churches in Galatia.

Amen.