

Text: Acts 14
St Stephen's

Never Easy, Always Worth It

A man named FB Maltby used to say that Jesus promised his disciples three things. They would be absurdly happy, completely fearless and in constant trouble. (M Green, p.226)

As we track Paul's first mission journey through Cyprus and Turkey, it would be hard to argue with that! The **joy** of Jesus, the **courage** of Jesus, and the **suffering** of Jesus are always close at hand for his followers.

As we have watched him on his **first mission journey**, we have seen him leave Antioch (in Syria), travel 100 miles by boat to Cyprus, go another 100 miles from one end of the island to the other, preaching from town to town. By the end of the chapter today he will have sailed north to the mainland again, and have journeyed hundreds of miles more into Asia Minor. He will then retrace his steps backwards and return to Antioch, where he started.

Along the way, you can't miss the **recipe**: *"Absurdly happy, completely fearless and in constant trouble"*.

After one very difficult time on this trip, Paul came back to a town where he **almost died**. Those young disciples were facing tough times and continuing persecution:

"We must go through many hardships to enter the kingdom of God"

Acts 14:22 (NIV)

Look at that word 'must'. Following Jesus means seasons of hardship. There is no getting around it, no avoiding it. As you sweep through Acts, we find that **difficulties will come from at least five sources...**

- **Circumstances that are Hard**

From Paphos, Paul and his companions sailed to Perga in Pamphylia... Acts 13:13

They had no visible means of support. No overland transportation; they walked. Often unprotected from the weather. No finances. No debit cards or ATM machines. They worked with their hands to supply their needs. Their mission lasted a couple of years. Along the way, they suffered from lack of food, ill health and hard work.

Life gives you a long list of difficulties. Your **faith in Christ doesn't insulate** you from troubles like these, but it does give you a very different set of resources to deal with them.

- **Character that is Stubborn**

John left them to return to Jerusalem.

Acts 13:13

We are going to take a better look at this in a couple of weeks, but what happens as they move from the island of Cyprus to the mainland we know as modern Turkey is that **John Mark goes home**. We aren't told exactly why, but in the next chapter we have the hint that **he has quit. Deserted**. Bailed out. Maybe it was too hard. Maybe he thought this was going to be a spectacular ride. But the hint is that it was **a character issue**.

He finds out that **the biggest obstacle to his ministry** for the Lord - is **himself!!**

Here's what else he finds: **God refines our character in the furnace of hard times**. John Mark bailed out, but as we will see, that will not be the end of his story. What God flushed out on this ministry trip, in the end he heal. Remember that. **He uncovers to cure. He reveals to restore**.

- **Culture that is Hostile**

Then some Jews came from Antioch and Iconium and won the crowd over. They stoned Paul and dragged him outside the city,

thinking he was dead.

Acts 14:19

When Paul and Barnabas got to Lystra and healed a man who was lame from birth, the local people first wanted to **offer sacrifice** to them. They thought they were gods! Paul would have nothing of it. And **within days, that same mob turned on them** and stoned them. First it was **praise without limit**, then it quickly became **persecution without restraint**. Look what then happens:

But after the disciples had gathered around him, he got up and went back into the city.

Acts 14:20

Just **imagine Paul**. He is dragged outside the city by the men who stoned him, and thrown in the dust, left for dead. The disciples gather around him, praying, no doubt, and he slowly gets up off the ground. Bruised, bleeding, and starts a slow walk back into that town – straight back into that town. **Think Rocky**. Except this is real. It happened. He went back in and looked them in the eye, spent the night there, and moved on to the next town on the next day.

That is **how that town was won** for Christ. It was won by the courage of Jesus. When they beat him within an inch of his life, he got up and walked straight back in and faced them. John Wesley used to say, “Always look a mob in the face” – he learned that from Paul, who learned it from Jesus.

- **Church that is Corrupted**

Even from your own number men will arise and distort the truth in order to draw away disciples after them.

Acts 20:30

We haven't looked too much at this yet, but one of the primary sources of opposition to the mission of the gospel comes from **inside the church**. Starting with the betrayal of **Judas** we meet a series of people who start out with Christ and then end up

opposing him, often from within the church.

I have found over the years that it is so important to keep the **leadership of the church healthy**. And it is so important to **have some humility** about ourselves. And it is important to **take our pulse** from time to time – are we being faithful to Christ and his word...? And it is so important to **say our apologies**. I know that some of you have been hurt by the church of Jesus Christ, perhaps here, perhaps elsewhere. I would like to ask again for your forgiveness. In the name of Jesus Christ and of the church of Jesus Christ, **I ask for your forgiveness**. And if you would like to come and talk to me, please do!

- **Satan who is Real**

Paul, filled with the Holy Spirit, looked straight at Elymas and said, "You are a child of the devil... Now the hand of the Lord is against you. You are going to be blind..."

Acts 13:9-10

We focused on this a couple of weeks ago; there are **evil spiritual forces that will contend** for every life. Paul got a taste of that when he met the sorcerer Elymas in Cyprus...

Christian ministry is a **power encounter** between two Kingdoms, the Kingdom of Jesus and the Kingdom of Satan. There are two Lords of these two Kingdoms who have **staked a claim on your life**.

But **only one of these Lords loves you**. Only one of them has given his life for you. Only one of them can free you to live the life you really want to live.

These are the five opponents you will always have to face along the way of your life for Jesus...

- **Circumstances that are Hard**
- **Character that is Stubborn**
- **Culture that is Hostile**
- **Church that is Corrupted**
- **Satan who is Real**

Want to sign up? Form a line!!! You might hold back, but here is the deal: I **don't think you can avoid facing** these enemies in your life. No one does. What you get to decide is **who you face them with.**

So let me close with a couple **things to remember in the season of hardship.**

1) Our Weakness Makes Room for His Power

They sailed back to Antioch, where they had been committed to the grace of God for the work they had now completed.

Acts 14:26

In every season of hardship Paul found that **grace was given.** In the season of extreme hardship, more grace was given. When he was faced with a particularly troubling physical infirmity, he had prayed for the Lord to take it away. But this was Christ's answer to him

he said to me, "My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness."

2 Corinthians 12:9

This experience of the Apostle was soon enough forged into a confidence, a life principle...

We say - we can't do what God asks us to do; it is too hard. The temptations are too big, opposition too fierce, our strength too small... We don't know what to say. We trip over our words. We're inadequate for the job. But **God's promise** is that at every step in the journey, **our weakness will be met with his grace.**

Scottish preacher James S Stewart,

"It is always upon human weakness and humiliation, not human strength and confidence, that God chooses to build his kingdom; and that he can use us not merely in spite of our ordinariness and helplessness and disqualifying infirmities, but precisely because of them. It is a thrilling discovery to make... Nothing can defeat a Church or a soul that takes not its strength but its weakness, and offers that to

be God's weapon..."

2) The Cause is Worth the Cost

From Attalia they sailed back to Antioch... On arriving there, they gathered the church together and reported all that God had done through them and how he had opened the door of faith to the Gentiles. Acts 14:26,27

Finally, after about two years of mission work, **they arrive back in Antioch**. The whole church comes out to hear their report, and it is a spectacular story of faith and hardship and answered prayer and miracles and persecution and joy and new churches planted in town after town and city after city. Here's their phrase, "*All that God had done through them...*"

Every believer has a report like that. Every life is meant by God for his purpose and his mission. You, too, have a report, a wonderful report, that God means you to be able to give!

Then look at **Luke's concluding phrase** in the paragraph, '*and how he had opened the door of faith to the Gentiles.*' It wasn't the miracles and the drama of the journey that Luke thought was **most important**. It was the Gentiles. It was **the people**. It was **lost people**.

People matter to God. Don't miss it. **Lost people matter to God**. People still get lost today. But no matter how lost, how hardened, how crushed, how broken. People matter to God. You have never looked eyes with someone who is beyond the compassion of Christ, the reach of Christ, the forgiveness of Christ, the cross of Christ. **Lost people matter to God**. This cause is worth any cost. It is worth the cost of the cross.

We are not here for ourselves alone. We are in this for our families and children, for our coworkers and our neighbors, for our communities and our cities.

It is a mistake to think that these people, our children and friends and neighbors will be won to Christ without effort. We will not pass on the good news of Jesus to the next generation without long prayer and compassionate love and clear witness from us. Maybe one of your **resolutions** this year could be to become an effective witness to those near you. Come join our **evangelism training** in January!

We are here for those who are not here yet, who have not heard yet, not believed yet, but who desperately need good news in a hopeless world. That's who we are here for. It is a great cause – the greatest cause above every cause. And this cause is worth any cost.

And along the way, you will be *absurdly happy, completely fearless and in constant trouble!*

I want to close in prayer today with the words of one of the Lord's servants of a previous century, Annie Flint, who had to face life with a crippling disease and adversity. This poem is a meditation on James 4.6 which simply says, "He gives more grace."

1. He giveth more grace as our burdens grow greater,
He sendeth more strength as our labors increase;
To added afflictions He addeth His mercy,
To multiplied trials He multiplies peace.
2. When we have exhausted our store of endurance,
When our strength has failed ere the day is half done,
When we reach the end of our hoarded resources
Our Father's full giving is only begun.
3. His love has no limits, His grace has no measure,
His power no boundary known unto men;
For out of His infinite riches in Jesus
He giveth, and giveth, and giveth again.