

“PAUL PERSECUTED BUT NOT FORSAKEN.”

Rev. Robert T. Woodyard

First Christian Reformed Church

November 8, 2020, 9 and 10:30 AM

Text for the Sermon: Acts 14:19-28

Prayer: Holy Father, please stoop down to us here in our need and help us, open our eyes and our ears and our hearts. Teach us eternal truth from your Word. Feed us, may your Word bear good fruit for your glory by the power of your Holy Spirit, in Jesus name, Amen.

Introduction.

With the conclusion of this morning’s sermon we will be half way through the 28 chapters of Acts. Because chapter 15 starts a completely new topic and section of Acts, we are going to pause our study and focus on a couple of thanksgiving related themes then begin our Advent series.

Acts 14:19-21, Persecuted But Not Forsaken.

You will recall from last week Paul and Barnabas were barely able to keep the people of Lystra from sacrificing to them as gods. Don’t miss the irony here. They are stoning their gods.

It was with great difficulty that Paul and Barnabas restrained the people from making sacrifices to them as gods. It was with no difficulty that some Jews from Antioch and Iconium persuaded them to stone Paul and Barnabas.

One day they were sacrificed to, the next day they were the sacrifice. One day they are ready to bow down and submit to anything they say, the next day they hate what they have to say and stone him to silence him. Crowds are fickle, mobs are easily manipulated. Today they shout hosanna, tomorrow they shout crucify.

We usually read over this passage quickly and casually. What was it like to be stoned, to be pummeled by rocks, bruised and battered, in terrible pain until mercifully he finally went unconscious? There is more than just the physical pain, there is the mental anguish and utter humiliation. Then to be dragged out of town and thrown on the town trash dump for dead.

Paul experienced a horrible injustice. No investigation was made, no due process, no being allowed to give his side, the laws were silent, the courts remained closed, the civil magistrates did nothing. The mob was the judge and jury.

We have a word for this today. It is called “cancel-culture.” Cancel-culture attempts to cancel out or silence opposing voices, voices that are not sufficiently progressive or politically correct or “woke.” And they use mob-like tactics. They shout down speakers on university campuses, they shame people on social media, they try to get co-workers who’s views they can’t tolerate fired. They are against free speech and open debate. They want to silence those who prick their conscience or make them feel guilty.

Increasingly those voices being canceled are Christian voices, Christians are being denied access to the public square of ideas and debate. The cancel-culture crowd is intolerant to Biblical views about religious freedom, marriage, sexuality, and abortion.

There are lies and sins that are so dearly held by our culture they are untouchable, sacred. There are people who hate the Gospel, they want it to have no opportunity to be proclaimed or believed. We see an example of this in the recent Banner where the Biblical positions are given the smallest voice and are painted in a negative light.

Paul is an example for us of courage and boldness, not feeling sorry for himself, and not being intimidated by the crowd. This is no small thing.

II Corinthians 4:8-9 We are afflicted in every way, but not crushed; perplexed, but not driven to despair; 9 persecuted, but not forsaken; struck down, but not destroyed.

II Corinthians 4:17 For this light momentary affliction is preparing for us an eternal weight of glory beyond all comparison.

He rose up.

But what is this? How does a man pummeled with stones and left for dead, get up and the next day walk to Derbe a journey of a 100 miles?

This has the sound of a miracle to it. The only way he lives is God is not finished with him yet, so God saved him. There is a fearlessness and courage and boldness that comes from a confidence and trust in the living God.

Romans 8:31 If God is for us, who can be against us?

What can man do? Why do we fear man so much?

Consider the courage of those who are willing to side with Paul, to be associated with him.

Consider the courage of Paul to walk back into the same town.

God uses what is broken and battered. Don't give up when God hasn't given up on you.

Paul continues preaching, teaching, exhorting, encouraging and strengthening their faith. Despite being stoned, the Gospel is still good news, still the very best news there is and worth whatever the cost.

Acts 14:22-23, Strengthening souls, encouraging saints.

Derbe is the end point of this first missionary journey. From there Paul and Barnabas turn around and retrace their steps, as if to water the seeds they had already planted. Or if you like a different metaphor, to continue building on the foundations they already laid.

We are told three things they did in this retracing of their steps on their way toward home.

First, they strengthened the disciples, and they encouraged them to continue in the faith.

Being a Christian in this culture was not easy, in fact it was dangerous and life threatening. Young converts were likely to waver. Their old friends were likely to try to win them back over to their old ways, or to return to the traditions of their fathers. Plus all the influential people were trying to show them how misguided they are. Swimming against the stream is hard.

Do you know anyone struggling to make their way in the faith? Do you know anyone wavering? Do you know anyone who needs help holding their arms up like Aaron and Hur did for Moses? Do you know someone who just needs to be reminded of the truth?

Our faith can never remain static, as if the day we made profession of our faith was the last thing we needed to do with our faith, and now we just go on about living our life. If our faith is not dynamic, is not growing, then it is dying. The key word is continuing, persevering.

This is where preaching the Gospel to ourselves every day comes in. We are continually surrounded by temptations to deny our faith, to live in a way contrary to it. We must pray over and over, "Lord, I believe, help my unbelief."

Second, they said, “through many tribulations we must enter the kingdom of God” (Acts 14:22).

Now wait a minute, is this any way to strengthen their souls and encourage their faith?

Paul is being a good pastor here, preparing them by warning them about hardship. Expect this, don't be surprised by this.

Do you think you would be encouraged to continue in the faith, if the one encouraging you was someone who had suffered terribly for continuing in the faith? Would Paul's faith inspire you?

Do you recall the story of the five missionaries who were killed in 1956 in the jungles of Ecuador by the Auca Indians? That story became the inspiration and fuel for hundreds of young people for the US to enter into missionary work.

That story also transformed the tribe that killed the men. Two of the widows went into the tribe and shared the Gospel with them. Can you imagine being taught how to forgive by two women whose husbands you had killed?

We pay more attention to those who have paid the price, who have suffered and suffered well.

This is why I say don't trust a person who doesn't walk with a limp. A person who has been humbled by suffering, who has paid the price, who knows hardship, trials..

You get a limp from wrestling with God in the night like Jacob.

You get a limp from wrestling with life, with pain, setback, failure, defeat, disappointment.

You get a limp when you have wrestled with injustice, unfairness, prejudice, hate.

Suffering is part of our sanctification, part of our discipleship training, part of our strengthening in the faith. Notice Paul used the plural for tribulations, and he doubled down by adding many tribulations, lest anyone think two or three is plenty and give up.

There are no exceptions, this is hardwired into the providence of God for all of us. God has ordained their number, their duration, their intensity and the purpose or effect they are to have on us.

The kingdom of God is gained by the hard path, by struggle, by continued dying to self and dying to sin, killing the flesh. We fight sin every day, we fight selfishness every day, we fight weakness. Paul teaches them and us the Christian life is hard.

If we expect to escape this life without trouble we will be severely disappointed.

II Timothy 3:12 All who desire to live a godly life in Christ Jesus will be persecuted.

Acts 14:22 ... through many tribulations we must enter the kingdom of God.

But, tribulations are not the only thing, there is an end, a reward, a worthwhile benefit. Like the Red Sea, God opens a way through it to victory and glory. Yes, there is a cross, but there is also a crown.

John 16:33 In the world you will have tribulation. But take heart; I have overcome the world.

Romans 8:16-17 We are children of God, 17 and if children, then heirs—heirs of God and fellow heirs with Christ, provided we suffer with him in order that we may also be glorified with him.

I Peter 4:12-13 Beloved, do not be surprised at the fiery trial when it comes upon you to test you, as though something strange were happening to you. 13 But rejoice insofar *as you share Christ's sufferings, that you may also rejoice and be glad when his glory is revealed.*

Galatians 6:9 Let us not grow weary of doing good, for in due season we will reap, if we do not give up.

James 1:12 Blessed is the man who remains steadfast under trial, for when he has stood the test he will receive the crown of life, which God has promised to those who love him.

It is a spiritual principle or law that we will have tribulations, but it is also a spiritual principle or law that those who believe in Jesus will enter the kingdom of God and His glory. There is a happy ending, a joyful end.

Through many dangers toils and snares we have already come,
'Twas grace hath brought us safe thus far and grace will lead us home.

Third, “they appointed elders for them in every church” (Acts 14:23).

This is the goal, the aim, the purpose of missionary work. That there be new converts and that those converts are ingrafted and incorporated into a community of believers, a

church. A church is not a church until it has spiritual leaders and a church is best served when there is a plurality of leaders, not just one.

And that church will be healthy when prayer is its foundation, when nothing is undertaken without seeking the will of our Father in heaven.

This applies to each of us. We should begin and end every single day with prayer. We should desire and seek the wisdom and will of our Heavenly Father, for every step we take.

Christian leaders must be people of prayer and they must be prayed for. A Christian leader who doesn't think he needs prayer is a leader who has not gained a limp.

In many of Paul's letters he asks for prayer. I need prayer. I am needing grace and wisdom for this season our church is in. Covid has knocked all of us for a loop, and I am finding myself burdened and stressed by it. I can't do this without God's grace and wisdom and strength.

Implications and application.

And speaking of prayer. Depending on who you ask either last Sunday or this Sunday is the International Day of Prayer for the Persecuted Church.

I urge us to remember in our regular prayers and in our family prayers the persecuted church. While that is a daunting prayer, especially when Christians are being persecuted all over the world in record numbers, you could choose to focus on Nigeria.

Christians are under a sustained, brutal assault by two groups bent on their destruction: The Islamist terror group Boko Haram and Fulani militants motivated by a mixture of Islamist ideology and greed for land. On any given day, Christians are killed, raped, and kidnapped.

More Christians have been killed in Nigeria than Islamists have killed in Syria and the rest of the Middle East.

What Paul endured, countless millions of Christians are enduring every day. This is not something far away and long ago, it is our brothers and sisters now.

Does your prayer seem unimportant? Prayer is real work, praying is doing something. Prayer aligns our hearts with the heart of God. And the heart of God is aligned with our brothers and sisters who are being persecuted. The more we pray the less we will tolerate silence about their persecution, the less we will tolerate silence about the Gospel, the less we will tolerate silence about the truth, and the less truth will be cancelled.