

Ready to Suffer

Acts 14:8-23

Years ago I heard a statement that I've found to be helpful when it comes to following Christ. Here it is: "What you win someone **with** is what you win them **to**." For example, let's say that you begin following Christ because someone told you, "If you become a Christian, your life will be easier." If that's what you believe, then you will follow Christ as long as it's easy. But when it gets hard (which it will), then you'll say, "I didn't sign up for this," and you'll begin pull back from following Christ.

But if you read through the gospels, you'll see that Jesus never won people with the promise that if they followed him their lives would be easier. To the contrary, he told his disciples that their lives would get harder in many ways. He told them that people would treat them the way they treated him (some loved him and some hated him). He told them that some people would insult and slander and lie about them on his account (Matthew 5:11). Jesus actually called people to suffer as he suffered.

Following Christ is a good life (the best life possible); but it's also a hard life at times. Today's passage illustrates how clearly and deeply Paul understood his calling to suffer for Christ. It also describes Paul's conviction that all disciples have that same calling. That's why he prepared the church to suffer well.

I trust that this account will help us understand our calling to suffer and the need to prepare for that suffering.

Acts 13 ended with Paul and Barnabas being driven out of Antioch by an angry crowd. Acts 14 begins with Paul and Barnabas fleeing from Iconium because they heard about a plot to kill them. Today's passage, Acts 14:8-23 describes how Paul and Barnabas were persecuted in the town of Lystra.

Our calling to suffer for Christ. (Acts 14:8-20)

Beginning in verse 8 Luke tells rather matter-of-factly how a man lame from birth was healed instantaneously by Paul when he perceived that the man had faith.

8 Now at Lystra there was a man sitting who could not use his feet. He was crippled from birth and had never walked. 9 He listened to Paul speaking. And Paul, looking intently at him and seeing that he had faith to be made well, 10 said in a loud voice, "Stand upright on your feet." And he sprang up and began walking.

This account is very reminiscent of the account in Acts 3 in which Peter healed a man who was lame from birth. In both cases we're told that Paul and Peter looked intently (3:4 - "directed his gaze on him") and commanded the man to stand up (3:6 - "rise and walk"). The similarity of these stories confirms that Paul was acting in the same power of the Holy Spirit as Peter before him (and as Jesus before him - see Luke 5:17-26).

The reaction of “the crowd” reveals that their worldview was about as far away from that of Paul and Barnabas as possible. Their understanding of the world included mythology which contained examples of their gods taking on human form to do miraculous works as Paul had just done.

11 And when the crowds saw what Paul had done, they lifted up their voices, saying in Lycaonian, “The gods have come down to us in the likeness of men!” 12 Barnabas they called Zeus, and Paul, Hermes, because he was the chief speaker.

Barnabas was in likelihood older than Paul and perceived as the leader of the missionary team; therefore they viewed him as Zeus, the “chief of the pantheon” (see Boch, p. 476). Since Paul was the one who did the speaking, they viewed him as Hermes, the messenger of the gods (i.e., the god who brought messages to people). Since the crowd was speaking in their local language, Lycaonian, it’s likely that Paul and Barnabas didn’t know what they were saying. But their intent became obvious when the priest of Zeus showed up. . .

13 And the priest of Zeus, whose temple was at the entrance to the city, brought oxen and garlands to the gates and wanted to offer sacrifice with the crowds.

The custom was to put garlands on the oxen, parade them around, and sacrifice them at the temple on the outskirts of the city. As you can imagine, when Barnabas and Paul understood what was happening, they reacted almost violently.

14 But when the apostles Barnabas and Paul heard of it, they tore their garments and rushed out into the crowd, crying out,

In the Jewish world, tearing your robes/garments expressed that someone had committed blasphemy against God (Boch, p. 477; see Numbers 14:6). Barnabas and Paul “tore their garments and rushed out into the crowd”! Being worshiped by the crowd was the last thing they wanted; they wanted the crowd to worship Jesus.

In verses 15-17 we have the first example in Acts of how the apostles addressed a purely pagan audience; we’ll see this again in chapter 17 when Paul speaks to a crowd in Athens. We’ve already seen in Acts examples of Philip and Peter and Paul addressing Jews and God-fearing Gentiles (see Acts 8, 10, and 13). But here Paul addresses a crowd that didn’t share his belief that there is one true living God who is the Creator of everything.

15 “Men, why are you doing these things? We also are men, of like nature with you, and we bring you good news, 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.

The men of Lystra thought they were being generous by worshiping Barnabas and Paul; Barnabas and Paul told them they were being idolatrous. He said they should turn **away from Zeus and Hermes** and turn “**to a living God**, who made the heaven and the earth and the sea and all that is in them” (see Exodus 20:11, Psalm 146:6, etc.). Paul tells

them to stop worshiping the created and begin worshiping the Creator. The premise here is that ***the created is accountable to the Creator.***

16 In past generations he allowed all the nations to walk in their own ways.

In the past God wasn't actively seeking out the nations the way he is now after the death and resurrection of Christ. It's not that he didn't care about them. But in a sense, he let the nations have their gods. At the same time, Paul says in verse 17, God was not silent. He was speaking through creation.

17 Yet he did not leave himself without witness, for he did good by giving you rains from heaven and fruitful seasons, satisfying your hearts with food and gladness."

In the past God displayed his goodness by sending rain from heaven (where God lives) and by giving them fruitful seasons (crops). Paul wanted them to know that when their hearts were satisfied with food and gladness they were experiencing the goodness of God! [Interestingly, the book of Acts tells us how God added to the "witness" of creation with the "witness" of Jesus' disciples.]

Verse 18 suggests that the crowds weren't completely convinced by Paul.

18 Even with these words they scarcely restrained the people from offering sacrifice to them.

Whereas Paul was trying to restrain the people from acting on impulse, others wanted to inflame them to act on impulse. In verse 19 Luke tells us that the same Jewish leaders who had opposed Paul in Antioch and Iconium followed him to Lystra. Just as Paul had previously been zealous to seek out Christians and persecute them, these people were zealous to seek out Paul and persecute him. This isn't "karma," and this isn't God paying Paul back for his previous sins. No, this is the reality of opposition to the gospel in every generation.

19 But Jews came from Antioch and Iconium, and having persuaded the crowds, they stoned Paul and dragged him out of the city, supposing that he was dead.

The crowd went from wanting to worship Paul to wanting to kill him. Perhaps they were easily persuaded to turn on Paul because he had rejected their worship. We simply don't know. But they stoned Paul and dragged him out of the city, supposing him to be dead.

20 But when the disciples gathered about him, he rose up and entered the city, and on the next day he went on with Barnabas to Derbe.

As we'll see in the rest of the passage, being stoned and left for dead wasn't a deal-breaker in Paul's relationship with God. He didn't shake his fist at heaven and say, "God, I'm down here serving you . . . Can't you take care of me better than this?!?!" No, like Jesus and the other apostles, he entrusted himself to God. He got up, he recovered,

he continued his assignment as apostle to the Gentiles. Paul understood that suffering for Christ was part of his calling.

Back in Acts 9 we read that Jesus told a man named Ananias to go to Saul/Paul and pray with him. When he expressed reluctance and fear because of Paul's reputation as one who persecuted Christians, Jesus told him this:

15 But the Lord said to him, "Go, for he is a chosen instrument of mine to carry my name before the Gentiles and kings and the children of Israel. 16 For I will show him how much he must suffer for the sake of my name."

From "day 1" Paul understood that he was called and appointed to a life of suffering for the name of Jesus. It wasn't meaningless suffering; it was purposeful suffering that would have consequences for time and for eternity. He eventually got to the place where in Philippians 3 he expressed that he wanted to know Christ so fully that he not only wanted to know the power of his resurrection but also "the fellowship of his sufferings" (Phil. 3:10 NASB).

My question is, "Who *thinks* that way? Who actually wants to know 'the fellowship of [Christ's] suffering'?" One answer would be, "The person who is controlled by the love of Christ." That's what Paul wrote in 2 Corinthians 5. Paul never got over the fact that Jesus died for him. His conviction was that since "He died for me, I will live for him." Paul's life was shaped by the gospel. ***He accepted his calling to suffer for Christ.***

My next question is, "Have we accepted our calling to suffer for Christ?" Do we think the way Paul thought about suffering for Christ? One challenge in even answering this question is the fact that in this country we don't presently face the type of persecution Paul did. I don't wake up in the morning wondering if I'll be stoned by an angry crowd and left for dead somewhere. So how do we evaluate whether or not we've accepted our calling to suffer for Christ?

Here are a couple thoughts. First, notice how offend-able you in general; notice how easily you are offended or agitated or angry in everyday life. Notice whether your instinct is to take revenge in thought, word, or deed. Notice whether you hold other people in contempt for the way they speak and act toward you. If we aren't long-suffering when it comes to these situations that are common to everyone, we probably haven't accepted our calling to suffer for Christ. Notice how offend-able you are in general. I've become persuaded that Christians should be the least offend-able people in the world (NOTE here).

Second, notice whether or not you are willing to risk being ridiculed or insulted or excluded because of your faith in Christ. That's the main type of suffering we face in this country at this time. Do we take risks in developing deep relationship with people who need Christ? Do we take risks in sharing the gospel and sharing biblical perspective when appropriate? Answering those questions will give us a good indication of whether or not we've accepted our calling to suffer for Christ.

Verses 21-23 point to:

Our need to prepare to suffer for Christ. (Acts 14:21-23) What Luke records in these verses is very significant. He tells us what Paul and Barnabas did after Paul had been stoned and left for dead. They retraced their steps, returned to the cities where people had come to Christ (Antioch - see 13:48-49; Iconium - see 14:1), and prepared them for opposition. Remember that the believers in these places had seen firsthand how Paul and Barnabas had been mistreated and run out of town.

21 When they had preached the gospel to that city [Derbe] and had made many disciples, they returned to Lystra and to Iconium and to Antioch,

In verse 22 Luke mentions three things that Paul and Barnabas did to help prepare the believers in these cities.

22 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.

“ . . . strengthening the souls of the disciples. . . ” Paul understood that the souls even of disciples can become weak and that resolve can fade. So his pattern was to strengthen the souls of the disciples (see 15:32, 41 and 18:23). We’re not told exactly how he strengthened these disciples, but it was likely through teaching them the Scriptures and praying for them.

“ . . . encouraging them to continue in the faith. . . ” Paul knew that people can lose courage and abandon the faith. So he encouraged them to continue in the faith as he was doing.

“ . . . and saying that through many tribulations we must enter the kingdom of God.” Paul didn’t view himself as the rare exception when it came to suffering for Christ. He would certainly suffer more than most. But he told the churches that tribulations are the common experience of everyone who entering the kingdom of God (meaning entering the kingdom after we leave this life). Our tribulations might include things like: battling with sin (we have an enemy who wants to take us out); ministry assignments from God (which often require sacrifice and suffering); persecution.

We see in verse 23 Paul’s pattern of ordering the churches with leadership.

23 And when they had appointed elders for them in every church, with prayer and fasting they committed them to the Lord in whom they had believed.

In light of the reality of tribulations and opposition, Paul knew that these new believers would need to be formed into communities. Just like children thrive in a stable, healthy family, believers thrive in a stable, healthy church family. They appointed elders who had the type of life worth imitating and who had the heart of a shepherd (see Acts 20 for an example of how Paul instructed elders to conduct themselves). In that context, communities of believers can be prepared to suffer for Christ.

Honestly, I don't think that the church in America (including our church) has done a great job in teaching about and preparing for our calling to suffer as Christians. Hopefully passages like the one we've studied this morning give us a vision for the calling to suffer and the need to prepare to suffer for Christ.

As well, I have listed several Scriptures at the bottom of today's sermon outline that talk about suffering as Christian from a variety of different perspectives. My challenge to you is to take the next week (or two) to read/study/ponder/pray through these Scriptures. In other words, let these words about suffering abide in you so that God can write them on your heart. Together they can confirm that all of us are called to suffer for Christ and that all of us should prepare for that calling. The two Scriptures in 2 Timothy illustrate this. In 2 Timothy 2:3 Paul tells Timothy, "Suffer hardship with me as a good soldier of Christ Jesus." In 3:10ff Paul reminds Timothy had witnessed the very persecutions and sufferings we've been studying about today. . . and how Timothy had seen how the Lord rescued him. In that context he writes, "Indeed all who desire to live godly in Christ Jesus will be persecuted."

Please, take some time over the next week or two to soak in these Scriptures and let God write them on your heart. Becoming prepared to suffer for Christ doesn't happen by accident.

Joseph Tson was a pastor in Romania during the sixties and seventies. He was often jailed and beaten because he preached the gospel of Christ. One day when he was being interrogated a man held a gun to his head and told him to renounce his faith. Joseph Tson said, "*Your greatest weapon is to kill me. My greatest weapon is to die.*" He went on to explain that if he were killed, he would become a martyr and other believers would redouble their commitment to Jesus Christ. He understood that suffering as a Christian is a powerful tool in the hand of God. He was a man who accepted his calling to suffer for Christ. He was a man who prepared himself for that calling.

May the same be true of us.

Scriptures on suffering for Christ: Luke 9:21-27, John 15:18-25, Acts 5:17-42, Romans 8:31-39, 2 Corinthians 11:16-33, 1 Timothy 1:8-14, 2 Timothy 2:1-6 & 3:10-17, Hebrews 11:32-40, 1 Peter 4:1-19, Revelation 6:9-11