We Must Go Through Many Hardships to Enter The Kingdom of God

(Turn from the worthless things to the living God)

Acts 14:1-28

Key Verse: 14:15b, 22

There was the great work of the Holy Spirit in Pisidian Antioch when Paul and Barnabas preached the gospel. Almost the whole city gathered to hear the word of the Lord. What an amazing story it would be if the whole city of St. Louis came to hear my message! Where there was the work of God, there was the work of Satan. Out of jealousy the Jewish leaders poisoned some leaders of the city and expelled Paul and Barnabas from the city. How did Paul and Barnabas respond to the persecution? Did they become upset or dejected? No. Not at all! They shook the dust off their feet as a warning to them and went to another city, Iconium. 13:52 says that the disciples were filled with joy and the Holy Spirit.

Here we learn from them how to deal with suffering and persecution while we are preaching the word. Be joyful and be filled with the Holy Spirit instead of being grumpy and filled with an angry spirit. Enjoy sufferings and persecution when you are doing good for the Lord. In the past Peter disowned Jesus three times because of his fear of suffering. But after being baptized with the Holy Spirit at Pentecost, his attitude towards suffering changed. He said in 1 Peter 4:13, “*But rejoice inasmuch as you participate in the sufferings of Christ, so that you may be overjoyed when his glory is revealed*.” In Mt 5:11-12 Jesus said, “*Blessed are you when people insult you, persecute you and falsely say all kinds of evil against you because of me. Rejoice and be glad, because great is your reward in heaven*…” Amen!

Paul and Barnabas went to Iconium. Iconium was an important agricultural city in the district of Galatia, located around 80 miles southwest from Pisidian Antioch. They went into the Jewish synagogue as usual and there they spoke the word of God so effectively that a great number of Jews and Greeks believed. (14:1) We don’t know how effectively they spoke the word, but they definitely did so with the help of the Holy Spirit. The Holy Spirit is the Spirit of wisdom and the Spirit of truth. So when we teach the Bible or counsel others with the Bible, we must depend on the Holy Spirit. The most effective way for preaching is depending on the Holy Spirit.

 When the word of God was preached, there were two different responses: some believed the word and sided with the apostles, while others rejected it and sided with the Jews. (4) The people of Iconium were divided. This kind of response happens to this day also, so we don’t have to be surprised. When Paul and Barnabas found that there was an evil plot among the leaders to mistreat them and stone them, they fled to the Lycaonian cities of Lystra and Derbe and to the surrounding country, where they continued to preach the gospel. (6) The apostles knew when to stay and when to leave. They followed the Holy Spirit. According to Ecclesiastes 3:1 says, “There is a time for everything,…a time to be born and a time to die, a time to plant and a time to uproot,…,”a time to stay and a time to leave, a time to fight and a time to flee.” The Holy Spirit teaches us what to do next when we ask for his wisdom and direction. The Holy Spirit teaches us when we continue to talk with listeners and when we have to stop. All preachers and evangelists must know when to continue and when to stop by following the Holy Spirit. The apostles fled to Lystra and Derbe. It was God’s time for them to move to other cities.

What happened in Lystra? Look at verses 8-10.“***In Lystra there sat a man who was lame. He had been that way from birth and had never walked.He listened to Paul as he was speaking. Paul looked directly at him, saw that he had faith to be healed and called out, “Stand up on your feet!” At that, the man jumped up and began to walk***.” Paul and Barnabas healed a born lame. This incident was a similar one when Peter and John had healed a born lame beggar at the temple gate in chapter 3:1-10. At that time the lame beggar looked at Peter and John expecting some money from them. He desired money. But Peter said to the man, “*Silver or gold I do not have, but what I do have I give you. In the name of Jesus Christ of Nazareth, walk*.” (3:6) Then the man got up and jumped to his feet and began to walk. (3:9) This time Paul saw the lame had faith to be healed. So Paul called out, “*Stand up on your feet*.” At that, the man jumped up and began to walk. (14:10) Here, we learn that whether they had the desire to be healed or not, they were healed by the apostles. We call this God’s irresistible grace and unconditional love. Whether we are ready or not, whether we are deserving or not, God’s grace is given to sinners like us unconditionally. Both lames received God’s grace and began to walk.

What was the result of this healing miracle? Read verses 11-13. ***11When the crowd saw what Paul had done, they shouted in the Lycaonian language, “The gods have come down to us in human form!” 12Barnabas they called Zeus, and Paul they called Hermes because he was the chief speaker. 13The priest of Zeus, whose temple was just outside the city, brought bulls and wreaths to the city gates because he and the crowd wanted to offer sacrifices to them.”*** The Lycaonians were astonished by the Paul’s healing miracle. They shouted, “*The gods have come down to us in human form.”* , and they wanted to worship Paul and Barnabas. They called Barnabas “Zeus” and Paul “Hermes”.According to the Lycaonian legend, Zeus and Hermes once came to the Phrygian hill country disguised as humans seeking lodging. They asked at a thousand homes, but none took them in. Finally, at a humble cottage of straw and reeds, an elderly couple, Philemon and Baucis, welcomed them. In appreciation the gods transformed the cottage into a temple with a golden roof and marble columns. Philemon and Baucis became priests of the temple, and they didn’t die, but became an oak and linden tree. So, the priest of Zeus, who thought Paul and Barnabas as the incarnate of Zeus and Hermes, brought a sacrificial offering to them to appease the wrath of Zeus and to redeem their sins.

How did the apostles handle this unexpected happening? Read verses 14-17. ***“But when the apostles Barnabas and Paul heard of this, they tore their clothes and rushed out into the crowd, shouting: “Friends, why are you doing this? We too are only human, like you. We are bringing you good news, telling you to turn from these worthless things to the living God, who made the heavens and the earth and the sea and everything in them. In the past, he let all nations go their own way.Yet he has not left himself without testimony: He has shown kindness by giving you rain from heaven and crops in their seasons; he provides you with plenty of food and fills your hearts with joy.”***Tearing their clothes was the expression of their extreme grief at the blasphemy people had committed in ignorance. Paul and Barnabas stopped the people from worshipping them. They identified themselves as mere human beings just like the others. They asked them to turn from these worthless and foolish things to the living God. They taught them the only true living God, the Creator of heaven and the earth, who provided all things necessary for them to live in this world.

The Lycaonians thought that worshiping Zeus and Hermes was the right thing for them to do. But Paul said that it was worthless thing. People do many worthless things thinking that they are doing what is good and right. In social media some celebrities brag about the number of their followers. Many people follow money and popularity. But after they came to know the living God, they realized that they followed worthless things. Before Sarang Cho knew the living God, she followed fame and popularity as a renowned artist. But she turned to the true living God after she experienced real joy and meaning of life in Jesus Christ.

Paul and Barnabas brought them the good news, the good news about the salvation through the forgiveness of sin by believing in Jesus Christ. The message of forgiveness of sin and the kingdom of God is good news for all people for all generations. What better news is there than the forgiveness of sin, Jesus Christ, and the kingdom of God? In order to enter the kingdom of God we need to be forgiven. Jesus died for our sins and rose again from the dead. Whoever believes in him and receives him as the Lord and Savior will enter the kingdom of God. This is the good news of the apostles.

Why and how did the situation change? Read verses 19-20. “***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.But after the disciples had gathered around him, he got up and went back into the city. The next day he and Barnabas left for Derbe.***” The Jews poisoned the Lystrians saying that if Paul and Barnabas were not gods, they should be imposters. The crowd stoned Paul and dragged him outside the city, thinking that he was dead. If Paul had died at that time, the story of Acts might have stopped with his death. But what happened? Paul, who was thought to be dead, got up and went back into the city. He went back into the city as if nothing happened to him. How could he do so? He could do so because he wanted to continue to do God’s mission for as long as he was alive. He did not consider his life worth anything unless he finished God’s mission. Later he confessed, “*I consider my life worth nothing to me; my only aim is to finish the race and complete the task the Lord Jesus has given me---the task of testifying to the good news of God’s grace.”* (Ac 20:24) God protected Paul’s life and raised him up again for his sake.

Later, while the apostles were returning to Antioch, they stopped by the cities they had visited before. Paul encouraged them to remain true to the faith and said, “***We must go through many hardships to enter the kingdom of God.***” (22) Let’s read verse 22 together. Paul could have continued his preaching about God’s blessing and his kindness as he preached in verse 17, “*He has shown kindness by giving you rain from heaven and crops in your seasons; he provides with plenty of food and fills your hearts with joy*.” Instead, Paul taught them that suffering is a prerequisite for the kingdom of God. He meant that suffering is necessary for us to enter the kingdom of God. His message might sound paradoxical. No one likes suffering. We expect that all things may go well with us without any suffering when we believe in Jesus. But, things do not go this way. The way of Jesus was the way of cross. The way of cross was the way of glory which accompanies suffering. His way was glorious with suffering. Those who follow Jesus will share with him suffering as well as glory. Paul said in Romans 8:17. “*Now if we are children, then we are heirs-heirs of God and co-heirs with Christ, if indeed we share in his sufferings in order that we may also share in his glory.”* Peter also said in 1 Peter 4:13. “*But rejoice inasmuch as you participate in the sufferings of Christ, so that you may be overjoyed when his glory is revealed*.” There waits the glorious kingdom of God before our eyes. We can go there by faith. Faith requires perseverance. Paul said, “*Suffering produces perseverance, perseverance, character, and character, hope*. (Ro 5:3,4) In order to enter the kingdom of God we may endure persecution. Some may receive rejection from their friends, co-workers, and even family members. Others may not sleep in order to finish their duty and responsibilities as God’s people. Still, others may sacrifice their time to take care of others. In Pilgrim’s Progress we learn how a Christian suffered in order to enter the kingdom of God, the Holy City. We must not fear suffering. After passing through the path of suffering, we will enter the glorious kingdom of heaven. Amen! Let’s read verse 22 again.

Paul’s ministry in Lystra seemed to be a failure because he was stoned and cast out. But this was not the case. This persecution became the glorious medal of honor for Paul. Later Paul boasted about his suffering as the marks of Jesus (Gal 6:17, 2 Cor 11:25, 12:7, 2 Tim 3:11) The persecution made Paul stronger and more courageous in preaching. In addition God raised a young leader Timothy through Paul’s ministry in Lystra. Timothy was from Lystra. His grandmother Lois and his mother Eunice were Paul’s disciples. (2 Ti 1:5) Paul’s preaching and suffering in Lystra brought the birth of another spiritual giant like Timothy, who later became the pastor of the Ephesian Church. Let us not give up in our preaching. Let us pray for Timothy-like disciples among young people. Our labor will not be in vain. Amen!

Finally the apostles went back to Antioch in Syria. On arriving there, they gathered the church together and reported all that God had done through them and how he had opened a door of faith to the Gentiles. (27) Their mission report must have greatly encouraged the believers in the Antioch Church. Today Paul’s life reminds us of Jesus’ words in Matthew 10:39, “*Whoever finds their life will lose it, and whoever loses their life for my sake will find it.*” Amen!