Acts 2024 Juan Seo (Aug 4, 2024)

**WE MUST GO THROUGH MANY HARDSHIPS**

**TO ENTER THE KINGDOM OF GOD**

Acts 14:1-28

Key Verse 14:22

***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.***

Last Sunday, we learned about the Apostle Paul's first missionary journey. For those who missed last Sunday's message, I would like to show the map of the first missionary journey again. After being sent from Syrian Antioch, Paul and Barnabas traveled through Seleucia to the island of Cyprus. They arrived in the city of Salamis, located on the eastern part of Cyprus, and proclaimed the word of God in the Jewish synagogues. Afterward, they traveled through the whole island until they came to Paphos. In that city, they fought a spiritual battle against Elymas, who opposed the gospel work, and preached the gospel of Jesus Christ to the proconsul Sergius Paulus. After that, they sailed to Perga in Pamphylia, and moving further inland to the north, they arrived in Pisidian Antioch. There, the Holy Spirit worked powerfully through Paul's message, and the word of the Lord spread throughout the whole region. However, Paul and Barnabas were expelled from Pisidian Antioch by the Jews who were jealous of them, and they went to Iconium. This is where we ended last Sunday’s message. Today's passage covers the second part of the first missionary journey, focusing on the ministry in Iconium, Lystra, and Derbe. It also covers the journey of Paul and Barnabas as they return to their home church in Syrian Antioch.

Iconium is a city located about 85 miles east of Pisidian Antioch. To give you a sense of the distance, it's even farther than the distance from Flushing to New Haven, where Yale University is located, which is about 74 miles. Traveling that distance back then would have taken around four days. After arriving in Iconium, Paul and Barnabas went as usual into the Jewish synagogue and preached the gospel of Jesus. They spoke so effectively that a great number of Jews and Greeks believed (1). And just as before, a significant opposition arose, led by the Jews who refused to believe. They stirred up the other Gentiles and poisoned their minds against the brothers (2). The opponents slandered Paul and Barnabas and bore false witness against their message, causing people to turn away from their faith in Jesus Christ. This is the work of Satan. John 8:44 describes the characteristics of the devil, stating that he is a murderer and a liar. Satan, the devil, uses lies to lead believers away from the path of faith in Jesus, resulting in spiritual death.

How did Paul and Barnabas respond to this opposition? Did they flee in fear because of their opponents? No! In verse 3, it says that Paul and Barnabas ***"spent considerable time there, speaking boldly for the Lord."*** They actively stayed in Iconium for a considerable time, preaching the gospel. We don't know exactly how long this "considerable time" was, but it was the longest duration they spent in any location during their first missionary journey. God blessed their decision of faith. The Lord performed signs and wonders through Paul and Barnabas, confirming the message of his grace delivered by them. As a result, the people of Iconium were divided into two groups. Some sided with the Jews, and others with the apostles. Then some Jews and Gentiles plotted to mistreat and stone Barnabas and Paul. When Paul and Barnabas found out this plot, they fled to the Lycaonian cities of Lystra and Derbe and to the surrounding country. Just as they had faced persecution and hardship in Pisidian Antioch, they encountered the same in Iconium, forcing them to move to another city. However, even in these new areas, they continued to preach the gospel.

Lystra is a city located about 19 miles south of Iconium, where there was a temple dedicated to Zeus outside the city. There was no Jewish synagogue, and the people of Lystra were ignorant of the God of Israel. In Lystra, something extraordinary happened to Paul and Barnabas. There was a man who had been lame from birth and had never walked. As he listened to Paul's message, he had faith to accept Jesus Christ. Seeing this, Paul shouted, ***"Stand up on your feet!"*** Immediately, the man jumped up and began to walk. Witnessing this miraculous event, the people of Lystra shouted in the Lycaonian language, ***"The gods have come down to us in human form!"*** Barnabas they called Zeus and Paul Hermes. Zeus was considered the king of the gods on Mount Olympus, and Hermes, a son of Zeus, was the messenger of the gods. The term "hermeneutics," which refers to the study of interpretation, is derived from Hermes. Seeing that Paul was the one speaking and Barnabas stood behind him, the people of Lystra assumed that Paul was Hermes, the spokesperson, and Barnabas was Zeus, the boss.

As the rumor spread that "the gods have come down to us in human form," the 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. This was due to a legend found in the works of the Roman poet Ovid. According to the legend, Zeus and Hermes visited an area of the province of Phrygia, but the local residents refused to receive them. Finally, an elderly couple welcomed them into their humble home. Grateful for the hospitality, the gods rewarded the elderly couple by transforming their home into a temple and making them priests of that temple. On the contrary, the gods punished the rest of the people by destroying their homes. Therefore, the people of Lystra, believing that Zeus and Hermes had appeared in the forms of Barnabas and Paul, wanted to offer sacrifices to them.

Up until that point, Paul and Barnabas didn’t understand what was happening because the people of Lystra were speaking in the Lycaonian language. It wasn't until they saw the bulls and wreaths being brought and someone explained the situation to them in Greek that they realized what was going on. In response, they tore their clothes and shouted, ***“Friends, why are you doing this? We too are only human, like you.”*** Paul and Barnabas urged the people to stop offering sacrifices immediately and shared the good news with them. Paul testified about God's general grace to all people and the general revelation that allows anyone to encounter the Creator God. However, some Jews came from Antioch and Iconium. These Jews traveled a distance of about 100 miles just to persecute Paul and Barnabas and hinder God's work. And they won the crowd over. How did the people of Lystra then treat Paul and Barnabas? The people of Lystra then stoned Paul and dragged him outside the city, thinking he was dead. The same people who had just considered Barnabas and Paul to be Zeus and Hermes and were about to offer sacrifices to them were now trying to kill Paul by stoning. This shows how emotional and capricious people can be. A similar event occurred when Jesus entered Jerusalem. The crowd welcomed Jesus as the Messiah, but just a few days later, they called for his crucifixion. Paul, like Jesus who was crucified and Stephen who was stoned to death, faced the danger of death while preaching the gospel. But God revived Paul. After the disciples had gathered around him, he got up and went back into the city. Although Paul appeared to have stopped breathing and seemed as though he were dead after being stoned, he rose again with faith in the resurrection of Jesus. Furthermore, he went back into the city. Why did he go back into the city? It was to encourage the brothers who were suffering persecution to have faith in Jesus. The next day, Paul and Barnabas left for Derbe. Verse 21 states that they preached the gospel in Derbe and won a large number of disciples.

Now Paul and Barnabas, having completed their first missionary journey, were returning to their home church in Syrian Antioch. If it were today, they could simply take a direct flight from Derbe to Syrian Antioch. However, they returned to Lystra, Iconium, and Antioch. These were the cities where they had faced severe persecution and where their adversaries were waiting to kill them. Normally, one would avoid these cities and take a safe route back to Syrian Antioch. Then, why did they return to these dangerous cities? It was because there were young disciples who had come to believe in Jesus Christ in those cities. These disciples were in a very difficult situation, facing persecution from their adversaries, both physically and spiritually. Their faith was still young, and they could easily lose their faith in Jesus Christ. Paul and Barnabas felt deep concern for these young disciples and wanted to help them in any way they could. Therefore, they took the risk of returning to those cities.

This is the heart of a shepherd. A shepherd is someone who protects the lives of his sheep. One who abandons the sheep in times of danger is not a shepherd but a hired hand. Jesus taught us the true image of a shepherd: ***“I am the good shepherd. The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep”*** (John 10:11). He also set the example of a true shepherd for us. Jesus sacrificed Himself and was crucified to save us from sin. We are truly grateful to be the sheep of this good shepherd, Jesus. And if we are entrusted with Jesus' flock, we must be ready to lay down our lives to protect and save the sheep, just as Jesus did.

I feel heartbroken when I think about the sheep I left behind in Venezuela. Last Sunday, there was a presidential election in Venezuela, and it was announced that the incumbent president Nicolas Maduro won. However, allegations of election fraud arose, leading many people to take to the streets in protest. Many people were killed, injured, or imprisoned as government soldiers tried to suppress the demonstrations. Last week, I spoke with Missionary Juan Baek and heard about the situation. One of his remarks deeply pained me: “The current situation is causing the young people of Venezuela to lose hope.” I felt like a hired hand who abandoned the sheep in Venezuela, and my heart grew heavy. I pray to become a good shepherd like Jesus, one who carefully looks after each sheep entrusted to me by God. I also pray that we will become good shepherds, serving many of Jesus' sheep in need not only in New York and the United States but also in Latin America and around the world.

Let's read verse 22 together: ***“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.”*** Paul and Barnabas strengthened and encouraged the disciples in Lystra, Iconium, and Antioch to remain true to the faith. And what did they say? ***“We must go through many hardships to enter the kingdom of God.”*** Are these encouraging words or discouraging words? When you hear the exhortation, ***“We must go through many hardships to enter the kingdom of God,”*** do you feel encouraged or discouraged? Some of us might feel discouraged by such words. Some might say, “Do you think I believe in Jesus to suffer? No, I believe in Jesus to receive blessings. The reason I come to church is to hear messages of blessing, not to hear about suffering.” Yes, I understand completely. We might already be enduring enough suffering in this world. We come to church seeking comfort and messages of blessing. As a messenger, I also find it much easier and more comforting to deliver messages of blessing rather than messages about enduring suffering. “Brothers and sisters, if you believe in Jesus, you will receive blessings. If you believe in Jesus, your business will succeed, and you will become wealthy. Those who are sick will be healed of all their illnesses. Your children will get into Ivy League schools and lead successful lives. Your life will go successfully in every aspect.” Aren't we used to hearing messages like these? But this is just one aspect of the life of faith. There is also another important aspect of our faith life, which involves enduring hardships. I, too, believe that if we believe in Jesus, our lives will be blessed. However, the blessings I speak of are different from the blessings that the world typically thinks of. The blessings I mean are the blessings of becoming more like Jesus, drawing closer to the kingdom of God, and living with hope even amidst suffering.

But why did Paul say to the disciples who were suffering from persecution: ***“We must go through many hardships to enter the kingdom of God”***? It is because we, as believers, can gain many spiritual benefits through hardships. These hardships refer not to the difficulties we face merely surviving in this world, but to the hardships we endure while living as disciples of Jesus and serving the mission He has given us. Paul uses "must," indicating that these hardships are an essential part of the journey for those who believe in and follow Jesus Christ. While we are saved by faith and enter the kingdom of God, living as true disciples inevitably means going through hardships. The phrase "to enter the kingdom of God" includes not only going to heaven after we die but also living under the reign of God and Jesus in this world. What benefits can we gain through hardships? **First, through hardships, we can receive great comfort from Jesus.** 2 Corinthians 1:5 says, ***“For just as we share abundantly in the sufferings of Christ, so also our comfort abounds through Christ.”*** **Second, through hardships, we can learn more about Jesus and become more like Him.** Apostle Paul said, ***“I want to know Christ—yes, to know the power of his resurrection and participation in his sufferings, becoming like him in his death, and so, somehow, attaining to the resurrection from the dead”*** (Phil 3:10-11). **Third, through hardships, we can have a great hope in the kingdom of God.** Romans 5:3-4 say, ***“We also glory in our sufferings, because we know that suffering produces perseverance; perseverance, character; and character, hope.”***

The Apostle Paul went through many hardships while preaching the gospel of Jesus Christ. 2 Corinthians 11:23-28 states that he has been in prison more frequently, been flogged more severely, and been exposed to death again and again. Five times he received from the Jews the forty lashes minus one. Three times he was beaten with rods, once he was pelted with stones, three times he was shipwrecked, he spent a night and a day in the open sea, he has been constantly on the move. He has been in danger from rivers, in danger from bandits, in danger from his fellow Jews, in danger from Gentiles; in danger in the city, in danger in the country, in danger at sea; and in danger from false believers. He has labored and toiled and has often gone without sleep; he has known hunger and thirst and has often gone without food; he has been cold and naked. Besides everything else, he faced daily the pressure of his concern for all the churches. But he received great comfort from Jesus; he learned more about Jesus and became more like Him; he had a great hope in the kingdom of God. I pray that all of us, as disciples of Jesus, will serve the gospel ministry and go through many hardships with faith. I also pray that we will become true disciples of Jesus, learning from Him and becoming more like Him. Let's read verse 22 again: ***“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.”*** Amen.