

Part 25: Hardships and Hope

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If you look at OSHA's data, you can find a list of some of the most dangerous jobs presently in our nation. Some of these might catch you by surprise like, garbage and recycling collectors, delivery and truck drivers, and agricultural workers. But a survey of modern and ancient labor will probably show one mainstay in the top 10: mining and underground workers.

From my perspective, most of the dangers are apparent—namely darkness, the tunnel caving in around you, Balrogs, and accidentally tunneling into the core of the earth. But, one of the biggest dangers is invisible: carbon monoxide poisoning.

The lack of ventilation for fresh air to circulate is the most prevalent issue faced underground. At the beginning of the 20th century we had discovered technology drove the mine shafts deeper, and made the tunnels sturdier. And yet, it more and more miners were dying because of the invisible issue of poisonous gasses.

But right around then, they found an odd solution: Canaries. Those small bright yellow song birds were taken down in the tunnel with them. They carried them in cages and when the air was too dangerous the birds would pass out. This indicated to the men that they were in danger and they would retreat back to safety. You might have heard the phrase, “a canary in the coal mine,” and this is the origin of it. To be a canary in a coal mine is to be a sign of oncoming danger.

In the book of Acts, we are tracking the first missionary journey of Paul and Barnabas—and it seems they are the canary in the proverbial coal mine. When Jonny preached last they were chased out of Antioch by violent persecution, and in today's text they find the same response in Iconium and in Lystra.

Yet as they are afflicted, many are saved. Though they themselves suffer, they help others see the danger around them as well—drawing them into safety—even if that safety seems dangerous by worldly standards.

The Bible would add another job description to the dangerous list—that of Christian ministry. And while our story focuses initially on Paul and Barnabas, two “professional” ministers—it ends with a commission to every Christian inside those local churches calling them to endure and work amidst the dangers and hardships of life in a sinful world.

Life is dangerous. But if you know where to look, it's in the darkest moments that we find a way out. We can try to avoid trial, trauma and distress in this world—but it seems that regardless of what you believe it is an impossible task.

But what we see today instead is the hope and hardship of following the canary of Jesus through the dark depths of this world. In his death we find life, and in his resurrection, we too are promised hope in the life yet to come.

Our main point this morning then is this: **Christian ministry exposes gospel hope amidst real hardships.** As we follow Paul and Barnabas they show us the invisible dangers and the true hope of life in this world. Seeing their assessment and their responses does two things. First, it encourages us in our own ministry and second, it provides hope not only for us—but for those who are still lost and dying around us.

We will see this in three ways through the three scenes of our text this morning. First we will see the hardship of **The Fear of Man** (and the hope of) **the Fame of God**. Then in Lystra we will see the empty promise of **Happy Compromise** (and the need for) **Eternal Clarity**. And lastly as Paul and Barnabas plunge themselves again into the mines that almost killed them, we will see **Worldly Comfort and Kingdom Hope**.

As this point, Paul and Barnabas are moving from Antioch Pisidia, which is in what is now Central Turkey, and they are being forced back to the south east by persecution. Here they enter the town of Iconium and we read this.

Acts 14:1-6, "Now at Iconium they entered together into the Jewish synagogue and spoke in such a way that a great number of both Jews and Greeks believed. But the unbelieving Jews stirred up the Gentiles and poisoned their minds against the brothers. So they remained for a long time, speaking boldly for the Lord who bore witness to the word of his grace, granting signs and wonders to be done by their hands. But the people were divided; some sided with the Jews and some with the apostles. When an attempt was made by both Gentiles and Jews, with their rulers, to mistreat them and to stone them, they learned of it and fled to Lystra and Derbe, cities of Lycaonia, and to the surrounding country, and there they continued to preach the gospel."

As human opposition continues to bear the divine fruit of conversion, it's in Iconium where we see the first invisible danger and present hope: **The Fear of Man and the Fame of God**.

Who, or what, you believe to be your biggest hope always shapes your view of self and your response to others. To put that another way, what you believe about God—be that belief or unbelief—always shapes how you view yourself and you view others.

One thing to note as we move through this text is that those who do not believe in God are easily pressured into new actions and new beliefs by whoever comes to them and screams the loudest. If our biggest hope is in pleasing the opinions of the crowds around us we will always flip, flop and flounder as we adopt whatever the newest mode of belonging and behavior is.

This is such a natural reality of life in this world. That's what we mean when we use the phrase "fear of man." Even those who claim to not care what people think, show you that they care what people think by constantly telling you they don't care what people think.

And notice what we saw back in **verse 2**. The unbelieving, and hostile, Jews approached the unbelieving, and seemingly unbothered Gentiles—and they poisoned their minds against the brothers. Isn't that interesting? Notice how they don't attack the message of the gospel, or the God of the gospel that's being preached.

That could be because God is continuing to work signs and wonders and they realize that they don't really have an answer for it. But I think it's also because they are leaning into that pressure point that all

of us have. They realize that the best way to bump Paul and Barnabas off the message of God is to wage a two fronted war on the fear of man.

The first front of this war is meant to deter potential converts from joining it because of how potentially stupid they would look. Do you remember when roller backpacks were cool? No. Neither do I. That's why I never had one.

That's how the crowd attempted to slow those who heard the message of the gospel: "It doesn't matter how helpful, or powerful that God is to save you—do you really want to be a Christian? Look at those losers. They are such a drag and buzzkill."

Moreover because Christianity was unique in that it put men and women, Jews and Gentiles, slaves and free in the same social class and on equal standing with God—it was seen as social suicide compared to the elitist cultures around it.

Celsus, a second century author, was appalled that Christians allowed such people into their ranks as the poor and woman. He concluded saying this: **"By the fact that they themselves admit that these people are worthy of their god, they show that they want and are able to convince only the foolish, dishonorable and stupid, and only slaves, women, and children."**

Today it might be said, "By the fact that they themselves abide by century old rules, treating men and women as distinct, committing to chastity inside of marriage, boasting on exclusivity and dogma—they show themselves to be the most narrow minded and bigoted ignoramuses on the planet."

But Paul warns us of this: **1 Corinthians 1:18**, "For the word of the cross is folly to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God."

At the end of the day, all of us justify ourselves based off how we appear to someone—be that our own opinion of self, or others. But if you look back at the fashion you justified 15 years ago—you might find it dangerous to think your opinion—or anyone's opinion—might give you any confidence in their judgement. But if we care what God thinks, if we see his description of our sin and his declaration of peace through Jesus Christ as unchanging and eternal—then and only then will we find strength when differing opinions roar their head.

We see the fruit of this in how Paul and Barnabas respond don't we? Their response is really counterintuitive. Having their own name slandered and their own reputation tarnished what do they do? **"Acts 14:3**, "So the remained for a long time, speaking boldly for the Lord..."

If you want to know what it looks like to trust God in evangelism and discipleship—this is it. Here is the most practical fruit and challenge: do you care more about what people think about your logic, your leadership, and your labor than you care what they think about your God?"

Brothers and sisters, I have a weekly battle when I preach here. I never preach a sermon I'm pleased with. And I go to my row, and I sit and I think, how could I have said that better? I look around and I judge how palpable the worship is, and I wonder what people thought of the sermon. And I weekly have to say to myself, "Get over yourself! Did you present God's word clearly? Did you handle the text humbly? Then stop making this about what people think about you! Worship God and trust others to do the same."

I wonder how many of us face trials like this, and cave into that old fear of man? I wonder how many of us need to stop confessing our lack of evangelism and need instead to confess our present prideful hearts!

Our message is foolish! But our God is not. This is part of his divine plan to show us that we can endure much hardship expense of his name so that the name of Jesus might be seen as that which truly saves and satisfies.

These men were so focused on God that they were blind to the problem of how people viewed them, and instead saw the need to help people see Jesus more clearly. So much so that even when they had to flee from persecution in Iconium—they didn't stop preaching Christ as they arrived in Lystra.

Here we see our second hidden danger and real hope: **Happy Compromise and Eternal Clarity.**

The events of Lystra as so unique, especially in contrast with Iconium. First, we saw faith in Iconium, but not faith like we see here. Here, at the preaching of the gospel Paul sees a man with such a sincere faith—that a miracle is performed to vindicate him in his trust in Jesus.

But secondly, this miracle wasn't just for the lame man's sake, it was also to display the power of God and vindicate his divine power in a town where there was little to no Jewish influence. The absence of Paul and Barnabas going to a synagogue to teach reveals that this town was primarily pagan. Archeologists have discovered paintings and holy sites in Lystra dedicated to Zeus (the chief god) and Hermes (his messenger).

A legend that far outdated Paul and Barnabas' visit recorded the myth of Zeus and Hermes visiting the town and being neglected hospitality. The result was that the town was judged by flood, and only the older couple who welcomed were spared.

The third contrast is in the response they receive in Lystra. In Iconium they received the persecution of poison—but here it seems they receive the persecution of praise. Let's examine these contrasts together: **Acts 14:8-13**, "Now at Lystra there was a man sitting who could not use his feet. He was crippled from birth and had never walked. He listened to Paul speaking. And Paul, looking intently at him and seeing that he had faith to be made well, said in a loud voice, 'Stand upright on your feet.' And he sprang up and began walking. And when the crowds saw what Paul had done, they lifted up their voices saying in Lyconian, 'The gods have come down to us in the likeness of men!' Barnabas they called Zeus and Paul Hermes, because he was the chief speaker. And the priest of Zeus, whose temple was at the entrance of the city brought oxen and garlands to the gates and wanted to offer sacrifice with the crowds."

Here we see how varied unbelief can look and how we need more than a thermometer on social acceptance to know if we are being faithful in our gospel ministries.

Notice the two kinds of unbelief we have seen so far. In Iconium we saw blatant rejection from the Jews, "This belief has nothing to do with what we believe." But in Lystra we find the more common form of unbelief we can call syncretism. In Lystra they said, "Aha! These men are just another form of what we believe!"

They stripped all the offense of the message of the men, and they blended it to fit their own worldview. Where the fear of man can cause us to retreat, this happy kind of compromise can cause us to settle.

Imagine the contrast that this would have been for Paul and Barnabas. They had been driven out of the two towns prior with pitchforks and now they are being praised and worshipped.

In today's culture we might run into those who says, "Your doctrine is stupid and wrong." But more commonly I run into those who say, "Your doctrine is my doctrine. We are all saying the same thing just going about it in different ways."

And here's the danger—it's easy to let that be the view people have. You'll make lots of friends that way. You'll run into so little pinch points and awkward moments if you let them take the gospel story and fit it to whatever story they are already living. You could say, "As long as they just some Christian language, and maybe they don't kill anyone, and maybe they are a little more generous—then what's the big harm? Is it worth losing the peace?"

But that's the very thing Paul and Barnabas are fighting for! Peace! Here we see how easy it is to be self-centered. When we encounter hostility directed at us like in Iconium—we all see the danger of it—and we fear it. But we really don't fear this form of unbelief. Why? Because it doesn't harm us!

It benefits us, really. And yet it harms everyone around us who is lead to think they are good. The Old Testament warns of prophets who "proclaim peace when there is no peace." And if our only goal is keeping peace with others apart from gospel peace, we cause great harm!

That's why Paul says this: **Acts 14:14-15a**, "But when the apostles Barnabas and Paul heard of it, they tore their garments and rushed out into the crowd, crying out, 'Men, why are you doing these things? We also are men, of like nature with you...'"

He is quick to say, "We are men like you!" Remember, this town is responding with the myth of Zeus' visitation in their mind. Last time something like this happened, they saw the problem of no peace—the town was supposedly wiped out. So here they rush to make peace with false gods, who are just real men, and Paul says, "Being men like you can cannot provide what you want!"

And then he does what we so often don't want to do—he risked the happy compromise and pressed for gospel clarity. He says, "I don't think you know the gospel. What we are preaching is not what you are believing." He goes on and says this: **Acts 14:15-18**, "We bring you good news, that you should turn from these vain things to a living God, who made the heavens and the earth and the sea and all that is in them. In past generations he allowed all nations to walk in their own ways. 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.' Even with these words they scarcely restrained the people from offering sacrifice to them."

Central to the Greek understanding of gods and sacrifice is the same word we use often in Christianity: propitiation. That means the turning aside of wrath. The Greeks had to sacrifice to their gods so that the gods wouldn't kill them. They had to feed the gods so they were fed, act in such a way sexually that the gods were sexually satisfied, and give money so that they gods were well funded.

The world always asks us to give up something to give us peace. But notice what he said about the good news of the one true God. He is the generous one. He's the one who gives rains, he's the one who

satisfies us. Why is he picking up this theme? Because he's showing the wonderful contrast of the gospel, the only source of true peace. The message of the gospel is not that if work hard enough to please God he will be hospitable to us. The message of the gospel is that God is first hospitable to us. The wrath of God is turned away—but not by our sacrifice—by his! God satisfied himself on the cross—so if we want peace we take and cling to the cross and that alone. When Paul uses that word “turn” in verse 15, it's the same word Peter used in **Acts 3:19**, "Repent, therefore and turn back that your sins may be blotted out."

The world around us is dying. We are so aware when fires burn in L.A., we grieve when planes and helicopters crash into one another—but do we see and are we grieved that apart from that one offering of the true God on the cross—all will perish eternally.

If we know such things to be true—then we will not put up with a tourist mindset here on earth. We will not be complacent while others so self-assuredly praise us and neglect the God who is worthy of all praise. We risk becoming crushed, so that the odor of Christ in the crucible might be sweet.

And that's exactly what Paul and Barnabas risked, and that's exactly what happened: **Acts 14:19-20**, "But Jews came from Antioch and Iconium, and having persuaded the crowd, they stone Paul and dragged him out of the city, supposing that he was dead. But when the disciples gathered about him, he rose up and entered the city, and on the next day he went with Barnabas to Derbe."

I'm not sure how many of you know what stoning is in a biblical sense. It is when a crowd would take you outside of town, place you at the foot of a small cliff or bluff, and set out to murder you by throwing rocks at you until you slowly bled out or died from internal trauma.

Do not neglect what we just read—Paul was stoned so heavily they thought he was dead. He alludes to these wounds in the book of Galatians and says he still bears on his body these, “marks of Christ.”

This is no trivial trial. The Canary fainted. But he didn't die.

What would you do if you encountered such difficulty on account of Christ? What do you think, you who have never suffered, of the difficulty you could face on account of Christ?

Well, look at our closing passage: **Acts 14:21**, "When they had preached the gospel to that city and had made many disciples, they returned to Lystra and to Iconium and to Antioch..."

They went to Derbe. The gospel was warmly received. There is no mob, no murder, no poison, no false praise. And what do they do? They go back into the mine. Back to Lystra, back to Iconium and back to Antioch.

Why? Because there were still Christians there and they needed to be reminded that life in the mine is dangerous, but if we keep our eyes on Jesus. We can make it. This is our final point this morning:
Worldly Comfort and Kingdom Hope.

If we expect life inside the mine of this world to look like that glorious haven above—we are mistaken. This world is not heaven. This life is not safe. And run to it all you will, it will not relent.

And while worldly comforts might dull the pain, like carbon monoxide, we are unaware at how it silently kills us.

In the face of this, Paul strengthens the church by drawing their eyes on two things.

First, their eternal hope: **Acts 14:22**, "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."

The world tries to tell us that sin is comfortable and worldly discomfort is dangerous. But the Bible reveals to us the danger of sin, and the discomfort and yet harmless trials of this world. Jesus suffered so that we would know suffering is real! We don't discount it. And yet Jesus rose to remind us that there is held out for us a better hope. A hope not of suffering minimized, but of suffering muted forever.

That's what the gospel does. It saves us from sin, for life. And right now while we live with sin in this life we refuse to be shaken from that which ultimately heals. We must ask Jesus to see where our walk with him is muted because we are so preoccupied with the comfortable, yet killing air of the world. What do you expect in your Christian life? These men returned because they knew that these believers would continue to be afflicted and he wanted them to not be surprised by the presence of it, but instead to be surprised and the promise we have within it.

Secondly, in light of their eternal hope—he points them to the present refuge. **Acts 14:23**, "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."

Where will God preserve us? Where will he care for us? Where is our comfort in an uncomfortable world? In the church. The world calls us to its care—but Jesus entrusts us to one another. This is where Jesus has committed you for safekeeping.

The canaries fainted when they sensed dangerous air, but they would wake up again when they got to safer air. But given the strain on the animals, and the invention of other tools to measure the air, the canaries were retired from this role.

But what's interesting is the response this had on the miners. When one mining crew retired their canary the station officer said this, "There's no doubt that the [mines] will be less colorful and quieter places without them...There is something about hearing them singing when you start work that lifts the spirits."

Brothers and sisters, we work in a dangerous place, but we our songs and colors are sweet in the mist of it. As we look and cling to the cross of Christ as our guide—our worship in the church is the witness of joyful hope to each other and to the watching world. We are the canary in the coal mine. We pray, we sing, and we labor so that others might not see us, but instead the light and the life of Christ at the end of the tunnel.