

From Applause to Affliction: Standing Firm in Christ

I. Confronting false worship with the truth

II. Continuing the mission in the midst of suffering

⁸In Lystra there sat a man who was lame. He had been that way from birth and had never walked. ⁹He listened to Paul as he was speaking. Paul looked directly at him, saw that he had faith to be healed ¹⁰and called out, "Stand up on your feet!" At that, the man jumped up and began to walk.

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.

¹⁴But when the apostles Barnabas and Paul heard of this, they tore their clothes and rushed out into the crowd, shouting: ¹⁵"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. ¹⁶In the past, he let all nations go their own way. ¹⁷Yet 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." ¹⁸Even with these words, they had difficulty keeping the crowd from sacrificing to them.

¹⁹Then 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. ²⁰But 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.

²¹They preached the gospel in that city and won a large number of disciples. Then they returned to Lystra, Iconium and Antioch, ²²strengthening 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.

Can you tell me, what do these people have in common? Bill Cosby. Tiger Woods. Lance Armstrong. Did you guess it? If you said they all three of these men were at one time incredibly popular, were at the top of their game, but then seemingly overnight, their reputation went into the tank, you're right. Because of things they did, they went from being heroes to being villains. That's the way it goes in our world sometimes. One minute you're a legend, the next minute, you're a louse. In fact, maybe you've experienced a bit of that in your own life. One minute people are liking and sharing all your posts; the next minute they're unfriending you or trying to cancel you completely.

But you realize, that kind of roller coaster ride on the old popularity meter, that kind of whiplash created when the circumstances of your life go from "Everything's going great" to "Man, things couldn't get much worse!"—you realize, that's not a 21st century phenomenon. It's something that's been happening since time began. I mean, you think of Old testament figures like Joseph, who one minute is the head of Potiphar's house and the next minute is rotting in a

jail cell. Or Daniel, second in command over all of Babylon, right before he's thrown into the lion's den. And, of course, who could forget Job, who one minute is enjoying life to the full and the next minute he's lost his fortune, his family and almost, his life.

What you are maybe not so aware of is a similar situation in the New Testament. In fact, it's our sermon text for today. Here in Acts chapter 14, we have the account of the roller coaster ride that the apostle Paul found himself on. At one point, the crowds around Paul and Barnabas were treating them like they're some kind of gods; the next thing you know, they're trying to stone Paul to death. And yet, through it all, from the extreme highs to the extreme lows, Paul remains unchanged. He's committed to the Lord. He's committed to the message that he has to share, and he's committed to the mission that the Lord has given him to carry out. And he's able to maintain that commitment because his joy, his sense of self-worth, his very purpose in life is not based on how other people are treating him but rather is based on what God had done for him. St. Paul knows that his Savior Jesus lived and died and rose triumphant from the grave. And that fact gave St Paul the ability to stand firm in the faith, no matter what his circumstances in life might be. And it does the very same thing for you and me today. In fact, that's the message that we want to focus on today. Our sermon theme is simply this:

From Applause to Affliction: Standing Firm in Christ

As we consider how Paul and Barnabas dealt with the situation they found themselves in, we'll see how these men lived out their Christian faith by:

I. Confronting false worship with the truth

II. Continuing the mission in the midst of suffering

First a little context. The events that we have recorded here take place in the middle of what's known as Paul's first missionary journey. As he travelled through what is now the country of Turkey, St Paul has already experienced considerable opposition to his message. In Pisidian Antioch and Iconium, the Jewish leaders stirred up persecution against Paul and Barnabas. When the apostles arrived in the city of Lystra, however, the reception they received was far more positive, primarily because of the miracle that God allows Paul to perform. Luke, who is the author of the book of Acts, records the event with these words: *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.* Obviously, this kind of complete and instantaneous healing of a man who was lame from birth was evidence that the Holy Spirit was at work. God was using these apostles as his instruments. God was working through these mere mortals.

But that's not how the people around Paul and Barnabas interpreted what they had just witnessed. What does Luke tell us? *"When the crowd saw what Paul had done, they shouted in the Lycaonian language, "The gods have come down to us in human form!"¹² Barnabas they called Zeus, and Paul they called Hermes because he was the chief speaker.¹³ 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.* Boy, talk about winning the popularity contest! The crowd basically treats Paul and Barnabas like they're some kind of first century rock stars. More than that, they treated them like they're gods. They're ready to offer sacrifices to them. Tell me, do you think that it might have been just a little tempting for Paul and Barnabas to kind of bask in the adulation for just a little bit? I mean, isn't there a part of each one of us that wants a little taste of glory? To think, "This is so cool. Maybe I can leverage this to my own advantage."

But that's not how Paul and Barnabas handled the situation. When the apostles realized what the people were saying about them, and the sacrifices they wanted to offer them, how do they respond? Luke tells us, *"But when the apostles Barnabas and Paul heard of this, they tore their clothes and rushed out into the crowd, shouting: ¹⁵ '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 other words, these ministers of the gospel not only vehemently object to the fact that the people are identifying them as gods. They are also calling on the people to turn from their worship of every false god (Paul refers to them as *"these worthless things"*), and instead, Paul invites them to turn to the true God (Paul calls him *"the living God, who made the heavens and the earth and the sea and everything in them"*). Did you notice, Paul uses what might be called this case of "mistaken identity" to do what? He uses it as an opportunity to preach the gospel. He uses it as a chance to call his listeners to repentance.

But note how he contextualizes his message to fit his audience. When Paul preached to the Jewish audience in the synagogue, just days before this, his sermon consisted of multiple references to the Old testament history. He pointed to Jesus as the fulfillment of the Old testament prophecies. But here, Paul is speaking to a crowd of pagans. They have no knowledge the Old testament scriptures. So instead, Paul needs to draw on their natural knowledge of God. This is something that is built into the heart of every human being, the idea that there has to be some higher power up there. Some divine entity. The question is, "Who is he?" And "What can we know about him?" Paul's answer is, "Let me tell you about him!"

In that sense, this sermon is similar to Paul's message to the Greeks in Athens when he finds that altar dedicated to "AN UNKNOWN GOD" and says to them, *"Now what you worship as something unknown I am going to proclaim to you."* (Acts 17: 23) In fact, here in his sermon to the people of Lystra, Paul pointed to some of the ways that God has proved his goodness to them. Paul explains to the crowd, *"In the past, he (God) let all nations go their own way. ¹⁷ 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."* (Acts 14:16-17)

So, what application does this section have for our lives today? Simply this: when God gives you an audience for the gospel, take advantage of it. How did Saint Paul put it in I Timothy 4:2? *Preach the word. Be prepared in season and out of season.* Or the words of the apostle Peter in 1st Peter 3:15, *Always be prepared to give an answer to everyone who asked you to give the reason for the hope that you have.*

Wasn't that what Saint Paul was doing in this situation? Even if the people were totally messed up in their thinking, even if they were steeped in superstition, even if they were blinded by their false beliefs, (I mean, they thought Paul was a god!), the fact is, Paul was still committed to telling them the truth about the God who loved them, the God who cared for them, and ultimately, the God who gave his life for them that they could live with him forever. And yet, as you heard, *"Even with these words, they (namely, Paul and Barnabas) had difficulty keeping the crowd from sacrificing to them.*

Now, I don't know about you, but I find it a little hard to fathom that Paul could go from being treated like a god to what happens in the very next verse. We read, *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. (Acts 14:19)* Talk about going from the pinnacle of popularity to

the pit of pain. That's a pretty drastic change of circumstances in the life of one apostle Paul. In fact, maybe it reminds you of someone else who at one moment the crowds acclaimed as their king, and then next moment called for his death, not by stoning, but by a crucifixion.

And yet, if you think about it, wasn't it that fact, the fact that Jesus, who had all the glory of heaven, willingly surrendered to the hands of sinful men to rescue mankind from sin forever, wasn't it the fact that Jesus then rose triumphant from the grave to prove his power over all our enemies, wasn't it the fact that Jesus came right out and told his disciples, "*If they persecuted me, they will persecute you also,*" (*John 15:20*)—isn't that what not only prepared Paul for the persecution he would face, but more importantly, gave him the ability to bear up under it, yes, to stand firm in spite of it. Isn't that what we see in this account? We see the apostle Paul, as a called servant of the risen Lord, not only I. Confronting the false worship with the truth, but also, II. Continuing the mission in the midst of suffering.

I mean, think about it. To be circled by a crowd of people throwing rocks at you until you're knocked unconscious and left for dead. This is what you get for being a follower of Jesus? This is what you get for faithfully speaking the truth in love? Man, if that were me, I think I'd feel like saying, "Forget about following Jesus. I'm out!". But not only does Paul endure the near-death experience, our text goes on to tell us something even more remarkable. *After the disciples had gathered around him, Paul got up and went back into the city. (Acts 14:20)* Really? He goes back into the city? What is Paul, a glutton for punishment? No. Paul is simply committed to carrying out the mission that Jesus had given him, namely, to bring the good news of a resurrected Lord to Jew and Gentiles alike. That's why, the very next day, he and Barnabas left for Derbe, where we read, *They preached the gospel in that city and won a large number of disciples.* In fact, rather than leaving behind those cities where they faced such opposition, what did Paul and Barnabas do? *Then they returned to Lystra and Iconium and Antioch.* Why would they do that? The answer? So that they could continue to strengthen the disciples and encourage them to remain true to the faith.

You see, Paul and Barnabas knew that if they were persecuted by those who were opposed to the Gospel, the same thing would likely happen to the rest of those who had recently converted to Christianity. In fact, that's why he tells them, pretty bluntly, *We must go through many hardships to enter the kingdom of God. (Acts 14:22)* Didn't you and I hear the same thing a couple weeks ago in John's vision of all those saints around the throne of God who had come through the great tribulation, that is, the period of time where you and I are living on this planet as Christians?

The bottom line is this: As long as we live, we are going to have good days and bad days, days when people love us, and days when they hate us. But those circumstances in life cannot steal our joy or diminish our determination to live for the Lord. Our joy, our self-worth, our purpose in life, is not defined by what other people think of us, or how they treat us, but rather by what Jesus thinks of us and what he has done for us. That's what allows us to live our lives to God's glory, filled with Easter joy...whether people are showering us with praise, or they're showering us with rocks. To him be the glory, forever and ever. Amen.