



feeding...gathering...carrying...leading. (Isiah 40:11)

Dear Church Family,

[Paul and Barnabas] returned to Lystra and to Iconium and to Antioch, 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. Acts 14:21-22

Paul and Barnabas have been experiencing tribulation in the form of opposition on this their first missionary journey. The first detailed account in this journey is in Paphos where Sergius Paulus is interested in the gospel and a Jewish false prophet named Elymas seeks to turn the proconsul away from the faith. But Saul, who was also called Paul, filled with the Holy Spirit, looked intently at him and said, "You son of the devil, you enemy of all righteousness, full of all deceit and villainy, will you not stop making crooked the straight paths of the Lord?(13:8-10). Elymas is a son of the devil who is opposing the spread of the gospel. In this instance, Paul completely defeats that opposition with the supernatural power to blind Elymas, which helps to convince Sergius Paulus of the truth of the message.

As Paul and Barnabas continue on their missionary journey, there is a pattern to their experience in Pisidia, Iconium and Lystra. The gospel is first preached in the synagogue and there is a favorable response that draws a much larger crowd the following week of both Jews and Gentiles. This raises opposition from some Jews who incite Gentiles to oppose Paul and Barnabas. In contrast to the experience with Elymas, the opposition is effective in being able to turn some away from the faith. In Pisidia the persecution drives Paul and Barnabas from the city. In Iconium, there is an attempt to stone them, but they are able to flee. And in Lystra, Paul is actually stoned to the point where his enemies thought that he was dead. A journey that began with Paul inflicting harm on an enemy of the gospel now has enemies of the gospel inflicting harm on Paul.

This combination of triumphal power over enemies in one instance and suffering at the hands of enemies in another is difficult to understand. But it is a part of the Acts story, also seen in chapter 12 where James is killed but Peter is miraculously delivered from prison. It is also a part of our lives in this world. There are great testimonies to God's healing and delivering power but there are many situations that leave us bewildered as to how things could be happening that seem so contrary to God's goodness and power.

We have been prepared for Paul's suffering because in Acts 9:16 God speaks to Ananias about Paul, saying, *I will show him how much he must suffer for the sake of my name.* And in the featured passage that introduces this pastoral letter, Paul and Barnabas are trying to prepare the new churches for this element of suffering that is a part of the Christian life. It is helpful to be prepared, but this raises the question of why we must go through tribulations.

We might think that the tribulation that Paul is talking about only applies to persecution when trying to spread the gospel, which is Paul's recent suffering. But when Paul lists his own suffering, he includes other suffering besides persecution. In 2 Cor 11, along with talking about being stoned and whipped he also talks about being shipwrecked, hunger, sleepless nights, toil and hardship in his life. All suffering that is not the result of people persecuting him. The reality of shipwrecks captures our question. While you are serving the purposes of God, wouldn't you expect to have smooth sailing? I believe that this teaching on tribulation can apply to our lives, to all of the situations where our lives are not as we would expect them to be as beloved children of an all-powerful heavenly Father.

In his second letter to the Corinthian church, Paul provides us with insight on how he understood the purposes of his own suffering. I commend these to you for your own meditation beyond the limited attention that we were

able to give them on Sunday (even more limited in this letter).

1 Cor 1:8-9 *For we do not want you to be unaware, brothers, of the affliction we experienced in Asia. For we were so utterly burdened beyond our strength that we despaired of life itself. Indeed, we felt that we had received the sentence of death. But **that was to make us rely not on ourselves but on God** who raises the dead.* Paul understands that this affliction was to make him reliant on God and not himself. Affliction does that. It makes us cry out to God for help. We naturally rely on ourselves when we are able to do so. And it is during those times that we tend to forget about God. Times of affliction are very stressful precisely because they are times when we are *burdened beyond our strength*.

2 Cor 4:7-9 *But we have this treasure in jars of clay, **to show that the surpassing power belongs to God and not to us.** We are afflicted in every way, but not crushed; perplexed, but not driven to despair; persecuted, but not forsaken; struck down, but not destroyed;* Jars of clay is an image of weakness because a clay jar is fragile and easily broken. This is not an image of indestructible strength that is able to withstand hardship unaffected. Paul's list *afflicted in every way, but not crushed; perplexed, but not driven to despair; persecuted, but not forsaken; struck down, but not destroyed* is a testimony that he is not defeated, but it is also a testimony that he is affected, he does suffer from these things. But somehow, it is in the suffering that God's surpassing power is revealed through him. We want to be strong, to be impressive in our ability to handle whatever challenges come our way and to be able to handle them easily. We believe that is godly strength, but Paul is saying something very different here. He speaks in a similar way about his thorn in the flesh in 2 Cor 12. Hearing from the Lord, *My power is perfected in weakness, Paul concludes, For the sake of Christ, then, I am content with weaknesses, insults, hardships, persecutions, and calamities. For when I am weak, then I am strong.*

One particular aspect to tribulation that we experience in life is that we do not understand what is happening. Paul talks of being *perplexed but not driven to despair*. The word perplexed means to be at a loss, not knowing what to think about what is happening. The word despair is simply a stronger form of this verb... utterly at a loss. It is comforting to hear Paul talk about being perplexed. So Paul did not always know what God was doing or what he was supposed to do or counsel others to do. He too felt at a loss in his own understanding. Paul did not end up in despair, utterly at a loss without hope, because he trusted that God did understand, that God was in control even and especially when he did not understand how God was in control.

Paul writes, so we do not *lose heart*. And in tribulation we are tempted to lose heart. This phrase conveys discouragement, an inner weariness where we lack desire to keep on going. Or we keep on, but we feel like we are just going through the motions. There is a feeling of emptiness. One remedy that Paul points us to is to fix our eyes on what is eternal. Our present tribulation is what we can see in front of us and it can speak a discouraging word about God and our relationship with Him. But there is an eternal weight of glory that is promised in the gospel. If we can set our eyes on those promises and believe the good news, we can be encouraged and strengthened in our faith.

In Luke 18, Jesus tells his disciples a parable to the *effect that they ought always to pray and not lose heart*. With this story, Jesus acknowledges that we will be tempted to lose heart and give up on prayer, but we must not do that. We must persevere in prayer no matter how discouraged or perplexed we might be about our tribulations. Pressing into the Lord in prayer is the only way to make it through the tribulation. And in ways that we often do not understand or are able to see, it is the way that we mature in our faith and God is glorified.

Pastorally Yours,

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