

Risk, Hope, Act

Introduction

The Text

²³ When many days had passed, the Jews plotted to kill him, ²⁴ but their plot became known to Saul. They were watching the gates day and night in order to kill him, ²⁵ but his disciples took him by night and let him down through an opening in the wall, lowering him in a basket.

²⁶ And when he had come to Jerusalem, he attempted to join the disciples. And they were all afraid of him, for they did not believe that he was a disciple. ²⁷ But Barnabas took him and brought him to the apostles and declared to them how on the road he had seen the Lord, who spoke to him, and how at Damascus he had preached boldly in the name of Jesus. ²⁸ So he went in and out among them at Jerusalem, preaching boldly in the name of the Lord. ²⁹ And he spoke and disputed against the Hellenists. But they were seeking to kill him. ³⁰ And when the brothers learned this, they brought him down to Caesarea and sent him off to Tarsus.

³¹ So the church throughout all Judea and Galilee and Samaria had peace and was being built up. And walking in the fear of the Lord and in the comfort of the Holy Spirit, it multiplied.

³² Now as Peter went here and there among them all, he came down also to the saints who lived at Lydda. ³³ There he found a man named Aeneas, bedridden for eight years, who was paralyzed. ³⁴ And Peter said to him, "Aeneas, Jesus Christ heals you; rise and make your bed." And immediately he rose. ³⁵ And all the residents of Lydda and Sharon saw him, and they turned to the Lord.

³⁶ Now there was in Joppa a disciple named Tabitha, which, translated, means Dorcas. She was full of good works and acts of charity. ³⁷ In those days she became ill and died, and when they had washed her, they laid her in an upper room. ³⁸ Since Lydda was near Joppa, the disciples, hearing that Peter was there, sent two men to him, urging him, "Please come to us without delay." ³⁹ So Peter rose and went with them. And when he arrived, they took him to the upper room. All the widows stood beside him weeping and showing tunics and other garments that Dorcas made while she was with them. ⁴⁰ But Peter put them all outside, and knelt down and prayed; and turning to the body he said, "Tabitha, arise." And she opened her eyes, and when she saw Peter she sat up. ⁴¹ And he gave her his hand and raised her up. Then, calling the saints and widows, he presented her alive. ⁴² And it became known throughout all Joppa, and many believed in the Lord. ⁴³ And he stayed in Joppa for many days with one Simon, a tanner. (Acts 9:23–43)

Gospel Love

A. I want to talk to you this morning about something I'd call "gospel love."

1. By this, I'm simply referring to that kind of love that arises from and accords with the gospel.
 - a. It's the sort of love that should characterize the church, because it's ultimately the love that's come to each one of us in Jesus.

B. And I bring this up now, of course, because, I think, it's clearly the kind of love we see characterizing these Christians here in our text.

1. And, so far as I can see, this gospel love is composed of three basic steps: Step #1: Risk; Step #2: Hope; and Step #3: Act.
2. And what I want to do with you is trace these out one at a time through three of the little vignettes that show up in these verses. If you noticed, each of these vignettes can be marked off by a different location.
 - a. So first you have this scene there in Damascus (vv. 23-25);
 - b. then it transitions to a second scene there in Jerusalem (vv. 26-31) [for the sake of time we'll have to skip over what happens there in Lydda (vv. 32-35)];
 - c. and it ends with the last scene there in a place called Joppa (vv. 36-43).
- C. Three basic steps of gospel love traced out through three little vignettes. That's our agenda. Let's get to it!

Step #1: Risk

In Our Text

- A. Gospel love is willing to risk for another—which means, of course, we're willing to move towards people even if we have to put our own comfort and security and peace on the line to do it.

1. That sounds hard, perhaps, but it's precisely what we see happening here in our text . . .

Scene #1: Damascus

- A. So, in Damascus, Paul has stirred up things there with his preaching, and as we saw last week, the Jews wanted to kill him. If you can't beat him . . . kill him.
 1. So "[t]hey were watching the gates day and night in order to kill him . . ." (v. 24).
 2. And we know from Paul's recounting of this episode in 2 Cor. 11:32-33 that it wasn't just the religious authorities hunting him down here—they even got the secular authorities involved in this.
 - a. So it's like the hound and the hare. He's hiding in a thicket. What's he going to do? Where's he going to go?
- B. Well, enter stage left: gospel love.
 1. The disciples, the church, they are willing to risk their own lives by siding with him in this and helping him escape: "[B]ut his disciples took him by night and let him down through an opening in the wall, lowering him in a basket" (v. 25).
 - a. Paul couldn't have pulled this off on his own. He needed others to intervene, to love him enough that they'd be willing to put their own safety and lives at risk.
 - i. The hound is waiting at the gates, so someone seems to have taken him into his own home which was likely built into the city wall (as some homes in

that day would have been), and they let him down from there through the window in a basket.

2. What if they'd gotten caught? What if these guys saw the house from which he escaped and marked it to follow up? Now the religious and secular authorities are coming for you.
 - a. What would you have done if you were a disciple here in Damascus?

Scene #2: Jerusalem

A. And what about in Jerusalem, where Paul goes next? He escapes Damascus and heads to Jerusalem, but what does he find there?

1. Not persecution, per se, but hesitation, and understandably so.
 - a. Remember, the last time we saw Paul in Jerusalem, he was overseeing and approving of the stoning of Stephen.
 - b. Beyond this, Luke tells us that there in Jerusalem *"Saul was ravaging the church, and entering house after house, he dragged off men and women and committed them to prison" (Acts 8:3).*
2. So this man had just ransacked the Christian community here in opposition to the church. And now, suddenly, here he is knocking on the door of the church? Are you kidding?
 - a. "Little Red Riding Hood's senile old grandma might have let the Big Bad Wolf come on in, but we're not going to be so foolish. You can put on the soft wool of a sheep, but you still smell like a wolf to me."

B. All of this is just my summary of v. 26: *"And when he had come to Jerusalem, he attempted to join the disciples. And they were all afraid of him, for they did not believe that he was a disciple."*

1. So what's going to come of this? Where does he go now?
 - a. You realize, don't you, that so much of what's going to happen in the rest of the book of Acts—with the missionary journeys and the advance of the gospel through Paul to the ends of the earth—depends on his being accepted into the Christian community here in Jerusalem with the apostles and all that?!
 - b. If he's not, the whole course of history could've been altered significantly.
 - i. So what's going to happen?

C. Well, enter stage left: gospel love.

1. And this time, gospel love has a name: Barnabas, which, fittingly means the *"son of encouragement" (Acts 4:36)*. In *Acts 11:24*, we're told that *"he was a good man, full of the Holy Spirit and of faith."* And so he was.

- a. And what does “a good man, full of the Holy Spirit and of faith” do in a precarious situation like this?
 - i. He risks his own neck for the sake of this murderer Paul. The sheep steps out to care for the wolf. It’s crazy. But it’s gospel love.
- 2. “But Barnabas took him and brought him to the apostles and declared to them how on the road he had seen the Lord, who spoke to him, and how at Damascus he had preached boldly in the name of Jesus” (v. 27).
 - a. The people there in Jerusalem, they didn’t believe Paul could’ve changed. They wanted to keep their distance. To stay safe.
 - b. But Barnabas was willing to move towards him. It’s clear he asked a lot of questions, listened to his story about the Damascus road and what followed, and then Barnabas brings him to the apostles, the leaders of the church, and advocates for him.
 - i. It’s a risky thing to do for a man who had caused so much harm in this community.
- 3. Barnabas puts himself, his safety, his reputation, his life on the line for Paul. And the world would never be the same because of it.
 - a. It’s Paul and Barnabas, you remember, who in Acts 13 are called together by the Holy Spirit and sent out on the first missionary journey.
 - i. And that relationship got started right here because Barnabas was willing to risk in love.

Scene #3: Joppa

- A. And then, quickly, fast forward to Peter in Joppa. There’s a disciple there named “Tabitha” in the Aramaic, or in the Greek “Dorcas” (v. 36).
 - 1. We’ll stick with Tabitha (her Aramaic name). Dorcas doesn’t have quite the same ring to it, you know what I mean? I know there are plenty of Christian parents who have named their baby girls Tabitha, but I’ve never met a Dorcas. And for good reason. The middle school playground would not be a safe place for a little girl with that name, alright. So let’s call her Tabitha.
 - 2. She was clearly a faithful gal, “full of good works and acts of charity,” Luke tells us in v. 36. But she got sick and died.
 - a. And her family and friends, hearing that Peter was nearby in Lydda, send for him. “Maybe he can do something!”
 - b. But how’s Peter going to respond? She’s dead. It’s over.
- B. Well, enter stage left: gospel love.

1. He's willing to come. And I'm saying this is a risk for a couple reasons . . .
 - a. For one thing, he doesn't always know what God's going to do. He could come and pray and look like the fool because nothing happens.
 - b. But beyond that, you remember, having been raised under Jewish law, Peter would certainly have been reluctant to go and spend time in a room with a corpse. This was to put yourself in danger of becoming unclean, ritually impure (cf. [Num. 19:11](#)).
 - i. And we know from what we'll soon see in [Acts 10](#) with this discussion about clean and unclean foods that Peter still is concerned for ritual purity in at least some ways (cf. [v. 14](#)).
- (1) And yet still he comes. He's willing to move towards the mess. "It's okay if I get some dirt on myself if it means I get to care for you."

C. He's willing to take the risk. And that's where gospel love starts.

In Our Lives?

- A. So I wonder: How are you doing with this? It's hard, right?
- B. It seems to be especially hard in our day. We live in a culture where the running motto so far as relationships is concerned goes something like this: "Life is too short to spend it with people who drag you down."
 1. I can't tell you how many memes and posts I've seen where celebrities, therapists, or whoever are talking about being brave enough to cut the people out of your life that don't lift you up. "Get rid of the toxic people," they say. "You don't need that kind of energy around you."
 - a. Have you heard this? Have you been influenced by it?
- C. I'll tell you: I don't know if you can come up with a relational strategy any more contrary to the gospel.
 1. Of course, there is some truth to setting up appropriate boundaries at times.
 2. And, yes, we are warned against yoking up with unbelievers and walking in the way of sin with them and things like that.
 3. But, let me just say this: If Jesus were to live by such a rule, we'd all be on the fast track for hell. You get that right?
 - a. If Jesus was risk-averse in relationship, and he only befriended people he was sure wouldn't harm him, he wouldn't have come from heaven in the first place and he certainly wouldn't have gone to the cross.
 - b. To put it bluntly: If Jesus refused to hang out with toxic people, he wouldn't be hanging out with people like us!

- i. Instead, what we see all throughout the Gospels is: these are precisely the kinds of people he came for!
- D. I just did a quick search to try to figure out how people are defining this idea of a “toxic” person. And as I read through the various traits, all I could picture was the twelve disciples . . . and me:
 - 1. Toxic people are manipulative.
 - a. Oh, you mean like James and John when they try to get their mom to ask Jesus to give them positions of power in the coming kingdom ([Matt. 20:20-28](#))?
 - i. Why did they get their mom to do it? Because, first, they knew Jesus might have a soft spot for mommy. But then, second, if and when the other disciples find out and get angry about it (which they do), they can wiggle out of it: “Why are you mad at us. We weren’t the ones who asked. She did it.”
 - (1) It’s manipulative.
 - 2. Toxic people are self-centered.
 - a. Oh, you mean like Peter when, after Jesus had walked alongside and cared for him for years, he denies ever even knowing Jesus to save his own neck ([Matt. 26:69-74](#))?
 - i. “Well, Jesus, thank you. You were useful for a little while to me. But now that you’re in chains and in trouble, a relationship with you is a bit of a liability for me, so I think I’m done.”
 - (1) It’s painfully self-centered.
 - 3. Toxic people are negative.
 - a. Oh, you mean like Thomas when, even after every other disciple is stoked up because they’ve seen the risen Lord, he still says, “Nah, I don’t think so. I won’t believe it until it’s proven to me. Jesus could not be alive!” Never mind the fact that Jesus had already explicitly told all of them he was going to do just this.
 - i. What a downer of a guy. Cut him out of the twelve, right? We don’t need this kind of negative energy.
 - ii. But Jesus doesn’t do that. Of course he doesn’t. Instead, he shows up to him in a personal way and helps him believe ([John 20:24-29](#)).
 - 4. Toxic people have anger issues.
 - a. Oh, you mean like the time when those disciples appropriately nicknamed “the sons of thunder” ask if they can call down fire on those Samaritan folks who withheld hospitality from them? ([Luke 9:51-56](#)).

- i. “We’ll kill them right now. Wouldn’t that be great?”
 - ii. “No guys. That wouldn’t be great. I appreciate the zeal, but I think we’ll let them live.”
- 5. Toxic people are controlling.
 - a. Oh, you mean like Judas, when he literally has Jesus tied up in Gethsemane and has him led off to his death, after betraying him with a kiss—where, if you remember, Jesus still, even then, calls him friend: “[Friend, do what you came to do](#)” (Matt. 26:50). “Control me, manipulate me, betray me, kill me. I don’t care. I love you.”
 - i. What?! Where’s that on social media? Where’s that from the celebrities and the psychologists of our day? You won’t find it.
- E. Don’t you understand? Why is the early church here willing to risk in love? Because that’s what Jesus does for us.
 - 1. Why is Barnabas willing to risk relationship with a known murderer?
 - 2. Well, “I killed Jesus with my sin. I’ve murdered God with my idolatry. And still he moved towards me. I think I can move towards you.”
- F. This is the call from Jesus—all over the NT. But I thought her in particular of what he says in the Sermon on the Mount, Matt. 5:43-48: “[43 You have heard that it was said, ‘You shall love your neighbor and hate your enemy.’ 44 But I say to you, Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, 45 so that you may be sons of your Father who is in heaven. For he makes his sun rise on the evil and on the good, and sends rain on the just and on the unjust. 46 For if you love those who love you, what reward do you have? Do not even the tax collectors do the same? 47 And if you greet only your brothers, what more are you doing than others? Do not even the Gentiles do the same? 48 You therefore must be perfect, as your heavenly Father is perfect.](#)”
 - 1. Don’t you see it? You’re not just hanging with the easy people. That’s what the world does. Let them do that. You don’t have to be born again to love those who love you.
 - 2. But you do have to be born again to love those who are hard, those who are messy. You might get some dirt on you in the process.
- G. If we’re going to love like Jesus it means opening ourselves up to being hurt like Jesus—it means taking a risk.

Step #2: Hope

In Our Text

- A. Gospel love is willing to hope for another—which means, of course, we’re willing to see people, all people, through the grid of the gospel.

1. And so, no matter how far off they may seem, no matter how deep their sin has gone, no matter how many times they've hurt us personally, we know God can still do great things in their life. We don't write anybody off.

a. We have hope.

Scene #1: Damascus

A. So, with these disciples in Damascus, let's not forget: They are putting themselves on the line for a man who had initially come into their city looking to kill them. They were the hare, he was the hound.

1. And yet when things have flipped and now he's being hunted down, they don't turn their backs and speak to the air: "Well, serves you right, you monster of a man, looks like you're getting what you've got coming for you."
2. No, as we've seen, they risk their own life to help him.

B. Why? Well, part of it is because they have hope for him.

1. They know what the gospel can do, what it seems to have done for Paul.
2. So they're not going to hold a grudge, they're going to hold out a hand.

Scene #2: Jerusalem

A. It's a very similar situation in Jerusalem, right?

1. They're just a few steps behind because they haven't seen firsthand the change Jesus has made in Paul's life. So they're wrestling in a way those in Damascus weren't.

- a. It seems all they know of Saul is the wicked stuff.
- b. And beyond that, in Damascus, he came in looking to hurt, but Jesus stopped him before he could. In Jerusalem, as I've said, it was not that way. He ravaged the church there. He destroyed lives.

- i. I mean think of this for example: People in this Christian community no doubt knew Stephen and still know his grieving widow. And they know his little kids, who still ask why God would let such a thing happen to their Daddy.

(1) We have them over for dinner, we cry with them, we try our best to help, but no amount of compassion or care will ever fill that void, or ease that ache.

B. And now here he comes knocking on our door, thinking he can just walk on into the fellowship here?

1. "I'd sooner let the devil through the door than this man. I couldn't stomach it. He's going to be in our gatherings with Stephen's wife and kids? Sitting next to them while we pray and worship and share a meal. This is just wrong."

- a. You feel that, don't you? Something of the tension they must have felt in this.
- C. But, in spite of all they'd suffered at the hands of this man, it wasn't bitterness or suspicion that won out in the Jerusalem community. It was hope.
 - 1. Barnabas was willing to see beyond what he'd done to what God could do for him in Jesus. "No one is beyond the reach of Jesus' grace. I'll go talk to him and hear his story. I'll extend hope to him because of the gospel."

Scene #3: Joppa

- A. And, of course, what we have on a more emotional, spiritual level with Paul in the first two scenes, comes at us in a more physical dimension in the last one.
 - 1. Tabitha is physically beyond hope it would seem—too far gone. She's dead. And yet, don't you understand: Peter knows the one who's defeated death. Peter knows the one who raises the dead.
- B. The language used here, it seems to me, is meant, in particular to draw attention to the fact that Peter's confidence in raising up this woman is connected to his confidence in Jesus' resurrection and power.
 - 1. That's why, in the Greek of the original text, the same word used all over the NT to refer to the resurrection of Jesus [Gk. *anistēmi*] is used here with reference to Peter and Tabitha (and back up with Aeneas as well for that matter). Look at vv. 40-41: "⁴⁰ But Peter put them all outside, and knelt down and prayed; and turning to the body he said, 'Tabitha, arise [Gk. *anistēmi*].' And she opened her eyes, and when she saw Peter she sat up.⁴¹ And he gave her his hand and raised her up [Gk. *anistēmi*]."
 - a. The point seems to be this: You can be raised up, because he was raised up. I have hope for you because I have hope in him.
- C. This is the sort of thing Peter is writing about in his first epistle when he says: "Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ! According to his great mercy, he has caused us to be born again to a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead . . ." (1 Pet. 1:3).
 - 1. We don't just have a vague notion of hope, an inkling of hope, we have a living hope. And his name is Jesus. Peter knows this.
 - 2. And that means he can look at the darkest and deadest situation and say: "Jesus can work here. I've seen him turn graves into gardens. He can do it again."

In Our Lives?

- A. So I just want to ask you: Is this how you're relating to people in your life—in your church, in your family, in your workplace, in your neighborhood?
 - 1. Are these relationship marked more by hope and expectation or by bitterness and suspicion, even fear?

2. Are you on a hunt, looking for evidence of God's grace at work in a person, or are you on a hunt looking for flaws, looking for reasons you shouldn't hope for them, you shouldn't trust them, you shouldn't include them?
 - a. It's hard, right? Especially you've been personally hurt in the relationship. But it's gospel love. So we risk . . . and we hope.
- B. Paul in his first epistle to the Corinthians tells us that: *"Love . . . hopes all things" (1 Cor. 13:7).*
1. You say, "Well what does that mean, really? It sounds nice at weddings, but what does that look like in real life?"
- C. Well, I think he gives a compelling picture of what this looks like in the way he treats the very Corinthian Christians he's writing this to . . .
1. These people are jacked up. They hurt him personally. Through the course of the 16 chapters of this letter, he's going to be calling them out for all manner of sin—there's division among them, there's sexual immorality, they're suing each other, they're getting hammered with the wine of the Lord's Supper, they're using spiritual gifts to prop up their egos and compete with each other, and on I could go.
 2. And when you know that this is where the letter is headed, it makes the way Paul opens the letter all the more stunning. Here's what he writes: *"¹Paul, called by the will of God to be an apostle of Christ Jesus, and our brother Sosthenes, ²To the church of God that is in Corinth, to those sanctified in Christ Jesus, called to be saints together with all those who in every place call upon the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, both their Lord and ours: ³Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. ⁴I give thanks to my God always for you because of the grace of God that was given you in Christ Jesus, ⁵that in every way you were enriched in him in all speech and all knowledge— ⁶even as the testimony about Christ was confirmed among you— ⁷so that you are not lacking in any gift, as you wait for the revealing of our Lord Jesus Christ, ⁸who will sustain you to the end, guiltless in the day of our Lord Jesus Christ. ⁹God is faithful, by whom you were called into the fellowship of his Son, Jesus Christ our Lord" (1 Cor. 1:1–9).*
 - a. And then he sets right out from there to address all the nonsense.
- D. So what do we make of this?
1. Is Paul just being disingenuous here—the way maybe you would be with that Uncle you can't stand when you bump into him at the holiday dinner: "Oh hey Bob, been thinking about ya, really miss you and the fam." Is that what this is?
 2. I don't think so. This isn't Paul being disingenuous. This is Paul seeing something we often don't. He sees the gospel—and these Corinthian Christians through the lens of the gospel.
 - a. He knows who they are in themselves, sure. He sees their faults. He's not gullible or naïve.

- b. But he also knows who they are in Jesus and who Jesus is able to help them become by his grace and Spirit.

- i. “Oh Corinthians, though you pain me so, God has good in store for you!”
“Love . . . hopes all things.”

E. So hope, the way I’m using it here, means . . .

- 1. If you’re a Christian, I’m not going to define you by your worst moments—by your flesh. I’m actually going to define you by your best.

- a. Because I know that’s from the Spirit, and the Spirit is at work in a believer at a deeper level than the flesh now. You have a new nature in Jesus. And you’re being transformed little by little until that good stuff has swallowed up the bad and there’s none of it left.

- i. So I see you in light of that. And I hope.

- 2. But, somewhat similarly, even if you’re not a Christian, I’m not going to define you by what you currently are in and of yourself. I’m going to define you by what you could be in Jesus.

- a. You’re not too far gone. I know the one who raises the dead. So I hope.

F. This is how he’s treated me—He doesn’t have hope for me because I’m just that awesome, he has hope for me because he’s just that gracious—so it’s how I can treat you.

Step #3: Act

A. But we take one more step, don’t we? We act. I’m not going to say much on this. I just want to make it clear that these things don’t just stay in the realm of the head or the heart.

- 1. Risk and hope for Paul in Damascus leads the disciples to lower the brother down in that basket. They don’t just talk about it. They act.

- 2. Risk and hope for Paul in Jerusalem leads the church there to not just leave a space for him in their hearts, in our prayers. They make space for him in our community. They welcome him.

- a. They rejoice in what God has done for him, even though they still grieve over what this man has done to them. They forgive. They act.

- 3. Risk and hope in Joppa leads Peter to not just sympathize with Tabitha’s family and friends from a distance or something. He changes his plans. He makes the 11 mile trek from Lydda to Joppa. He enters the room. He gets down on his knees. He prays. And he speaks to that corpse. He acts.

B. And, of course, we know this is the way Jesus has loved us.

1. He doesn't just think about, talk about, dream about rescuing us from our sin, reconciling us back to God.
 2. He comes down and he gives his life away to make it happen.
- C. So what about us? In our relationships, are we risking, are we hoping, are we acting on it?
1. What's God calling you to do in the name of gospel love today? Don't just think about it, pray about it, talk about it . . . do it!

Conclusion

Peace and Comfort?!

- A. I know it's hard. But it's worth the fight to get better at this. Why?
1. Well, in our text, did you see what results from this kind of gospel love?
 - a. There's two little summary statements at the end of each of those scenes with Peter that talk about people "[turning] to the Lord" (v. 35) and "[believing] in the Lord (v. 42).
 - i. And that's awesome. The church is attractive and grows when people see a love like this!
- B. But there's an even more stunning little summary given at the end of those scenes with Paul. Did you see it there in v. 31? "So the church throughout all Judea and Galilee and Samaria had peace and was being built up. And walking in the fear of the Lord and in the comfort of the Holy Spirit, it multiplied." Here's what I find so amazing about all of this . . .
1. We often forego gospel love and cut off from relationships with hard people because we want things like peace and comfort, right? "I don't want to risk, hope, and act in love for you because I want peace and comfort, and you threaten that."
 2. But this text says: If you really want peace and comfort—the kind that isn't shallow and fleeting but deep and substantial and lasting—then you don't forego gospel love, you lean into it; you don't push out the hard people, you bring them close.
 - a. Because that's what Jesus does.
 - b. And where Jesus is there is peace and comfort that this world knows nothing about.
- C. " ²³ If anyone would come after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross daily and follow me. ²⁴ For whoever would save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for my sake will save it" (Luke 9:23–24).
1. That's why I'm begging you to fight to grow in gospel love. Risk, hope, act like your life depends on it. Because, in many ways, it does!