

Out of the Frying Pan...

Acts 14:1-20

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There's an old saying that talks about going "out of the frying pan and into the fire." The idiom describes a situation when things go from bad to worse. We've developed several other such sayings: adding insult to injury; when it rains, it pours; kicking someone when they're down; rubbing salt in the wound; the straw that broke the camel's back. The reason we have so many ways of describing this same phenomenon is because it seems to be a universal part of the human experience. Most of us have experienced situations where things were bad, and then they just seemed to get worse. Those times are demoralizing. They lead us to throw up our hands in despair and consider giving up. That's why today's passage is so valuable.

In today's passage, we see Paul and Barnabas have their fortunes go from bad to worse, to even worse yet! After getting run out of Antioch, we would have hoped their fortunes would change, but they didn't. What is remarkable is Paul and Barnabas' response to these hardships. They didn't give up or despair. They didn't wallow in self-pity or claim victim status. Instead, they held their heads high and continued to carry out the work God had called them to do. Their example provides guidance for us when things inevitably go from bad to worse.

Iconium

When we last left Paul and Barnabas, they had just been run out of Antioch after preaching to the people there. A large crowd of people had come to hear them, but this large crowd upset the Jewish leaders there, who help to incite a mob. They ran Paul and Barnabas out of town. Rather than calling it quits, they shook the dust of the town off their feet (symbolizing that they were leaving everything about the city behind) and moved on to the next city.

The next city they went to was called Iconium. Iconium was about 60 miles away from Antioch, far enough away that they hoped to avoid further problems. Unfortunately, that was not to be the case.

The same thing happened in Iconium. Paul and Barnabas went to the Jewish synagogue and preached with such power that a great number of both Jews and Greeks became believers. ² Some of the Jews, however, spurned God's message and poisoned the minds of the Gentiles against Paul and Barnabas.

³ But the apostles stayed there a long time, preaching boldly about the grace of the Lord. And the Lord proved their message was true by giving them power to do miraculous signs and wonders. ⁴ But the people of the town were divided in their opinion about them. Some sided with the Jews, and some with the apostles.

⁵ Then a mob of Gentiles and Jews, along with their leaders, decided to attack and stone them. ⁶ When the apostles learned of it, they fled to the region of

Lycaonia—to the towns of Lystra and Derbe and the surrounding area. ⁷ And there they preached the Good News. (Acts 14:1-5)

Luke tells us right off the bat what to expect. He said, “The same thing happened in Iconium.” Paul and Barnabas followed their same pattern, going to the synagogue to preach, and many people, both Jews and Gentiles, came to faith. But there was a group of Jews who rejected their message and began to oppose them. They tried to convince others that everything Paul and Barnabas were saying was wrong.

But notice the response of the apostles. They didn’t leave just because they were facing opposition. They expected some opposition. So, rather than leaving at the first sign of trouble, Luke tells us they stayed there a long time! We don’t know how long, but it seems clear that the mere fact that some were opposing their message didn’t deter Paul and Barnabas from preaching. While they were doing that, they were also performing many signs and wonders, like what Jesus did during His ministry.

Eventually, however, the Jewish leaders managed to build a coalition of people to oppose Paul and Barnabas. It was a coalition of both Jews and Gentiles alike, and they hatched a plot to kill the apostles. It was only once this plot became clear to them that Paul and Barnabas decided to flee.

Even then, I don’t think they fled in fear, but in an effort to preserve their ministry. They believed God was not done with them yet, so they moved on to the next town before the people could act on their murderous plans.

Lystra

The next town they traveled to was Lystra. This was about 20 miles further away from Iconium. Luke tells us that Lystra and Derbe were both in the region of Lycaonia. This claim was once a source of historical debate. Most historical scholars insisted that Lystra and Derbe, though relatively near to one another, were never both in the region of Lycaonia. As such, they concluded that Luke was wrong on this detail.

It wasn’t until the work of Sir William Ramsay in 1895 that we had confirmation that Luke was right all along, and it was the so-called “scholars” that were wrong. Ramsay, a historian, was researching the area, and discovered that from 37 AD to 72 AD, Lystra and Derbe were both in the region of Lycaonia, but that was the only time in their history that they were. In other words, at the time that Paul and Barnabas were there, the two towns were both in Lycaonia—Luke was proven right again!¹

Most people believe that Timothy was from this town of Lystra, and may have even been one of those converted by Paul during this time. When Paul describes his hardships to Timothy later on, he indicates that Timothy had possibly seen first-hand the hardships he had faced in Lystra, so many conclude that he was from there.

¹ Ramsay, William Mitchell. *St. Paul the Traveller and the Roman Citizen*. London: Hodder & Stoughton, 1907, 110-113.

Lystra was more isolated than the towns Paul and Barnabas had visited thus far. The people there were mostly pagan. There was no Jewish synagogue. And while the people spoke Greek, they also spoke a native dialect called Lycaonian. This is a significant detail of the story.

⁸ While they were at Lystra, Paul and Barnabas came upon a man with crippled feet. He had been that way from birth, so he had never walked. He was sitting ⁹ and listening as Paul preached. Looking straight at him, Paul realized he had faith to be healed. ¹⁰ So Paul called to him in a loud voice, “Stand up!” And the man jumped to his feet and started walking.

¹¹ When the crowd saw what Paul had done, they shouted in their local dialect, “These men are gods in human form!” ¹² They decided that Barnabas was the Greek god Zeus and that Paul was Hermes, since he was the chief speaker.

¹³ Now the temple of Zeus was located just outside the town. So the priest of the temple and the crowd brought bulls and wreaths of flowers to the town gates, and they prepared to offer sacrifices to the apostles.

¹⁴ But when the apostles Barnabas and Paul heard what was happening, they tore their clothing in dismay and ran out among the people, shouting, ¹⁵ “Friends, why are you doing this? We are merely human beings—just like you! We have come to bring you the Good News that you should turn from these worthless things and turn to the living God, who made heaven and earth, the sea, and everything in them. ¹⁶ In the past he permitted all the nations to go their own ways, ¹⁷ but he never left them without evidence of himself and his goodness. For instance, he sends you rain and good crops and gives you food and joyful hearts.” ¹⁸ But even with these words, Paul and Barnabas could scarcely restrain the people from sacrificing to them.

¹⁹ Then some Jews arrived from Antioch and Iconium and won the crowds to their side. They stoned Paul and dragged him out of town, thinking he was dead.

²⁰ But as the believers gathered around him, he got up and went back into the town. The next day he left with Barnabas for Derbe. (Acts 14:8-20, NLT)

Paul and Barnabas had to change their tactics just a bit. Since there wasn't a synagogue to preach in, they likely began teaching outside, possibly in the town square. While preaching, Paul noticed a man who had been crippled from birth. We are told that Paul realized the man had faith to be healed. A good speaker pays attention to their audience and senses when people are engaged and when they are not. Paul saw something in this man that convinced him he had genuine faith. In most places in scripture, faith is a necessary requirement for God to heal people. Paul saw this man's faith and commanded him to stand up. When the man did, the people were amazed, because they knew him, and knew he had been born crippled.

After this healing, the crowd became quite animated. Paul and Barnabas surely noticed this. But the people began speaking in their local, Lycaonian dialect, which meant Paul and Barnabas had no idea what they were saying. All they could see was that the

people were suddenly very excited. I suspect they tried to use that excitement and channel it toward Christ. Unfortunately, that wasn't what happened.

Luke explains that what the people were saying was that Paul and Barnabas were gods! In particular, they believed Barnabas was Zeus and Paul was Hermes. The ancient writer Ovid sheds some light on why they may have jumped to this conclusion.

There was an ancient legend that Zeus and Hermes came to the earth in human form, visiting near the valley of Lystra. When they asked for lodging, all the people of the town refused, except for one poor, elderly couple. The two gods took their hosts out of the city and destroyed the rest of the people there. Then they transformed the old couple's tiny cottage into a gleaming temple.²

So, the people of Lystra likely remembered this story and concluded that they didn't want to make the same mistake again. When they saw Paul's miracle, they decided he must be a god, and they were not about to take any chances. But because they were speaking in their native language, Paul and Barnabas didn't realize that the people had concluded they were gods.

It wasn't until the priest of Zeus came walking into the city gate with bulls, wreaths, and garlands that the apostles realized what was happening. Suddenly, the situation was urgent. They needed to correct these people's pagan misbelief and get them back on the right path. So Paul and Barnabas immediately began to explain that they weren't gods at all, and in fact, they were regular human beings, just like them. So it was wholly inappropriate to worship them.

Though this was an unexpected turn, it was also an opportunity for them to share the gospel. It is worth noting the difference in approach between the message Paul preaches in Acts 13 and the message he and Barnabas preach here. The message in chapter 13 is full of references to the Old Testament and God's faithfulness to His people. This message contains none of that. Why? It's because Paul tailored the message to his audience.

Remember, in chapter 13, Paul was speaking to a group of Jewish people. They had a strong biblical background. As such, Paul dealt almost exclusively with the Bible, knowing that was the language the people understood. But these people knew very little, if anything about the Bible. So Paul took a different approach.

Paul called them to turn from worthless, lifeless idols to the God who is real and living and active. He pointed them to the world around them, arguing that the creation itself testifies to the goodness of God. It's the same argument he made in Romans 1. Though the entirety of the gospel cannot be known by looking at creation (which is why we need to share the message!), God's existence and character is clearly on display. Paul appealed to the fact that the people recognized there must be a God who provides for

² Ovid, *Metamorphoses* (New York: The Heritage Press, 1961), 267–72

them and is greater than them but also told them they have been worshiping something false. Jesus is the One true God!

Unfortunately, this still was barely enough to keep the crowd at bay. And things got even worse. Some people from Antioch and Iconium had traveled (quite some distance!) to come and oppose Paul and Barnabas and the message they proclaimed. They whipped the crowd into a frenzy and had Paul stoned and dragged out of town, where they left him for dead.

Think about what this experience had to have been like. Stoning was not a quick or easy way to die. The people would pick up rocks and hurl them at you until they killed you. It was slow, painful, scary, and truly agonizing. And this was what happened to Paul. The people stoned him and dragged his body out of the city, leaving him for dead.

When the believers (there were believers in Lystra!) rallied around Paul, he sat up, bloodied and bruised, but not dead. And then I love what Paul did next. He went back into the city! I cannot imagine being able to do that. What guts that must have taken.

But after a night's sleep, Paul and Barnabas headed to their last stop on their journey, the city of Derbe. We don't know a lot about what happened in Derbe, but it does seem that they didn't face much opposition there—at least nowhere near the opposition they faced in Antioch, Iconium, and Lystra—because later, when Paul wrote to Timothy about the persecutions he faced, he didn't mention persecution in Derbe. We'll discover next week that this final stop was very fruitful, as they made many disciples there.

Conclusion

As always, the question we must ask is what does this passage teach us about how we are to live as believers? What do we learn from the experience of Paul and Barnabas that can guide us as we walk with the Lord for ourselves?

First, hardships are a part of life, even for faithful believers. Somehow, we have gotten the idea that if we are serving the Lord faithfully, then life should go smoothly for us. When it doesn't, we begin to complain, feeling as though God isn't keeping up His end of the bargain. Paul and Barnabas show us that you can be serving the Lord faithfully and still face hardships. After all, Satan loves to attack those serving God in hopes of derailing their efforts.

At the same time, sometimes the hardships in our life are our own doing. Sin carries consequences with it. And sometimes God allows hardships to teach us or correct us. But the existence of hardships does not mean God has abandoned us, and it may not necessarily mean we've done something wrong. Hard times should cause us to examine our hearts, motives, and actions, and make changes as needed. But as long as we know we are doing what God desires, we should keep moving forward—even if we face some hardships along the way.

Second, we won't see God do great things until we have great faith. As we look at the man who was healed in Lystra, it is worth noting that Paul said the man had enough faith to be healed. In Matthew 15, when Jesus visited his hometown of Nazareth, we are told He was unable to do many miracles there because of the people's unbelief. This doesn't mean that if we just have enough belief we can get God to do what we want. What I think it means is that if we don't trust God enough, we will not see Him move.

Faith is not merely about believing in our heads that God can do things. We can claim to believe most anything. Faith is revealed in what we do. William Carey, the father of modern missions said this: "Expect great things from God. Attempt great things for God." The person who really believes God can move mountains will be the person who attempts what others think is impossible. When we feel the Lord leading us in directions that scare us, when we feel Him calling us to do things that seem beyond our abilities, those are the times when faith is tested. And it is the people who believe God enough to do what He says, even without understanding how He is going to work, that will often get to see Him do the greatest things. I don't claim to know how and when God chooses to do miraculous things. But I do know that until we begin exercising our faith, we will not have many opportunities to see Him move. True faith is seen in how we live—and when we trust Him enough to do what He says, that's when we'll see Him move most mightily.

Third, we must not allow the attacks of the world to keep us from faithful service. Paul spoke often about his hardships for the Lord. If you spend much time serving God, you will be attacked, mistreated, and hurt. Maybe that's not the best way to encourage people to serve, but it is the truth. Satan is much more motivated to attack people who are a threat to his dominion. When we begin doing things for God—when we serve our neighbors, when we share our faith with our family and friends, when we begin giving of our income to God, when we try to begin a ministry in the church, or we attempt a new discipline in our lives—we should expect that Satan will do everything he can to derail us from those things. But, when we understand Satan's tactics, it should give us greater motivation to keep doing what God has called us to do, no matter what. Paul and Barnabas kept being attacked everywhere they went. But they knew what the Lord wanted them to do. So rather than allowing hardships to discourage them, they chose to focus on the ways they saw God moving and saw the difficult things as opposition from the evil one. Do not let Satan's attacks be successful! When you face obstacles while serving the Lord, see the bigger picture, and be persistent in what you know God has called you to do. When we do that, we can keep moving forward, no matter what hardships we face.

Most of us will have times when we feel like difficulties are compounded in our lives. We will have times when we feel like we're trying to do the right things and just keep getting hammered for it. We must approach those times with eyes of faith. Remember that God is still in control. If you know you're moving in the direction He wants you to go, don't let anything stop you. It's in those times, the times when we put ourselves way out on a limb, relying fully on God, that we will have the greatest opportunity to see Him move.

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