

“A Lesson From Life”

Acts 13: 41-52

August 10, 2008

Rev. Curtis J. Young

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Here’s a question. Maybe you have asked it yourself. Why does everything have to be so hard?

More to the point, why does “it” have to be so hard, where it refers to working for something good, constructive, and wholesome.

Like a renovation...or a marriage...or keeping the house clean... or surviving adolescence? Chaos happens.

In Romans 8:20, Paul wrote, “For the creation was subjected to frustration, not by its own choice, but by the will of the one who subjected it...”

Futility. That means things do not go as planned. When the water pump goes out on the car, the refrigerator can’t be far behind! There is built in resistance and difficulty in doing anything good or beautiful, constructive or helpful, purposeful or orderly.

This is true of our material world, and especially true of our personal world, the interpersonal and spiritual realms in which we live.

Paul wrote of our world, “Though they knew God, they neither glorified him as God nor gave thanks to him, but their thinking became futile and their foolish hearts were darkened.” (Rom. 1:20) “The thoughts of the wise are futile.” (I Cor. 3:20)

That means if you are going to follow Christ and seek souls for God, you are going to face some mixed up thinking and mixed up living. That’s fine, because that is what it takes to speak the Gospel to the deepest part of others where the image of God is, where faith is born.

Still, the more you aim your life to reflect the God’s goodness and the reality that he created you in his image, the greater the resistance you will feel.

If all this leads you to ask, what does this have to do with Paul’s first missionary journey, good. Let’s look.

Chapter 13 begins with high hopes and ends with triumph. A season of prayer and fasting led to the prophecy: “Set apart for me Barnabas and Saul for the work to which I have called them.”

What could possibly generate more confidence than, “God has told me to go...He is sending me.”

At the end of the chapter, a city has come to hear about Jesus, many have believed, a new church has been planted, the word of God is spreading and the disciples are filled with joy and the Holy Spirit. The Kingdom of God has come, but as Paul points out later, it comes through tribulations.

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If you read the middle of the chapter and every word of the conclusion, you know Paul faced what you and I and every Christian faces, what missionaries face more than others.

This week I received Erik and Laurie’s e-mail after they arrived in Turkey, sent out by our church, ready to serve the Lord. How were things going?

Aside from the fact that some of their bags didn’t make it, they were refused an apartment because they are Christians, there are tensions among missionaries, and Laurie and the girls are sick, great!

I want us to consider this dimension of life in Paul’s own experience. I find it encouraging. When faced with these same things, he didn’t back up, didn’t retreat, didn’t second guess himself, didn’t waste time wondering whether the Lord had abandoned him, and didn’t doubt whether the Lord was at work. He moved forward just as we need to move forward in our lives spiritually.

The most obvious resistance he faced was the antagonism of his fellow Jews. Verse 45 says they were filled with jealousy when they saw the crowds listening to Paul. So they denounced him, shouted him down, stirred up the influential men and women of the city against him, and finally “expelled” him from Pisidian Antioch. That’s a delicate translation; the verb literally means to throw out.

They rejected Paul and the Gospel. Did that mean Paul rejected them? No in fact Luke will tell us Paul’s custom remained to go to the synagogues first, to testify of his faith first to his countrymen. Seven more times in seven different locations, Luke will report a similar experience followed by a similar rejection.

Do you think Paul ever got used to it? He would later write of profound his sorrow and ceaseless grief over his countrymen’s rejection of Christ, that he would rather be condemned to hell than see his kin harden their hearts.

Has a loved one threatened to reject you because of Christ, or forbidden you to speak of him? Has someone you naturally love laid down their law for you which is you must not bring Christ up? Do any of you know what it is like to pray for a loved one for years, only to see him become more and more closed? Then you know how Paul felt. And you know it’s hard. But you don’t retreat. You pray, and bide your time.

What of interpersonal conflict and tension? In verse 13, Luke says that when Paul and his colleagues landed in Perga, on the coast of Turkey on their way to Pisidian Antioch, “John left them and returned to Jerusalem.”

There is a huge story behind that word, but Luke does not tell it. We know later, after Paul invited Barnabas to join him to revisit the churches, they had a terrible falling out over Mark. Barnabas wanted to bring him. Paul wouldn’t hear for. Acts 15:38 says, “Paul did not think it wise to bring him because he had deserted them in Pamphylia and had not continued with them in the work.”

In Acts 14, it was “left”. In Acts 15 that becomes “deserted”. Paul had been deeply stung. He used this term in II Timothy 4:10 when he wrote, “Demas, having loved this present world, has deserted me and gone...,” or six verses later when he wrote, “At my first defense no one supported me, but all deserted me...”

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Deserted means John Mark had committed himself, Paul relied on him, but was abandoned. Paul was so affected by this that he would rather lose Barnabas than bring Mark.

What do you do when a brother or sister in Christ pulls the rug out from under you? Do you quit living for Christ? Do you let your disappointment in someone or their disloyalty to you ruin you for ministry?

Which brings me to the third hardship Paul faced which Luke does not mention, but Paul brought up as he wrote the Galatian churches several weeks later.

“As you know it was because of an illness that I first preached the gospel to you. Even though my illness was a trial to you, you did not treat me with contempt or scorn.” Can’t you imagine how that could have happened? People may have looked at the worn, weakened, haggard figure standing before them and mocked: “This is God’s messenger, the one that the mighty God is with? This is what happens when you experience God’s favor?” You can just imagine, can’t you?

But Paul went on, “Instead you welcomed me as an angel from God, as if I were Christ Jesus himself...I can testify, that if you could have done so, you would have torn out your eyes and given them to me.” (Gal. 4: 13-15)

Think of the timing. Just when John Mark deserted him, Paul became dangerously ill. It may explain why he didn’t preach at Perga but preceded directly to Pisidian Antioch. (13-14)

The Pauline scholar, Sir William Ramsay, hypothesized that Paul contracted a severe form of malaria common in low lying coastal areas, and greatly feared by Romans and Greeks. This would explain why he and his party made their way up 3,500 feet cooler, healthier environment of Pisidian Antioch, so Paul could recover.

The ancients wrote of malarial attacks attended by high fevers, stabbing head pains, and convulsions that left victims depleted and haggard.

Could recurrent bouts of malaria been Paul’s thorn in the flesh that left him so weakened that he begged God on three occasions to remove it? Could feverish eyes as sore as boils account for why the Galatians would have plucked out their own eyes for him?

Why does it have to be so hard? Why did Wilson have a major tooth infection when he went to Wales? Why did the weather have to be record setting foul when our team went to Mexico? Why do Laurie and kids have to be sick?

This is the truth about living for Christ, honoring and serving him. There is never an ideal time to do it. Satan will see to that. One way or another you will have a thorn in your flesh – a personal affliction, or a problem with someone you thought you could count on, or open antagonism and resistance.

Which is why verse 48 is so important: “When the Gentiles heard this, they were glad and honored the word of the Lord; and all who were appointed for eternal life believed.”

In other words, in spite of everything – the antagonism, the illness, the tensions, “all who were appointed for eternal life believed.” The great certainties are completely in God’s hands, including his determination to save a people for himself.

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The doctrine of election teaches me as a Christian that God is going to save people through me even though things are hard, even though they don't go as I planned or hoped, in spite of my afflictions or antagonism or whether everyone I depend on keep their commitments.

At the end of our chapter, Luke wrote, “The word of the Lord spread through the whole region...” (49) In the same way early, “the word of God spread” through Judea (6:7), and after Herod's attack on the church. (12:24). In chapter 19 we will read again how “the word of the Lord spread” in Ephesus. (19:20)

The Holy Spirit in the Bible is called oil, not grease. He doesn't make it possible for us to slip and slide through life and avoid its futility.

Rather, he strengthens us to endure. He confirms our resolve, increases our courage, nourishes our faith, deepens our compassion, gives us wisdom, and multiplies our patience.

(Reflection on Romans 8:20: The creation subjected to futility, *in hope* that creation will be liberated from bondage and brought into the glorious freedom of the sons of God. While Paul refers directly to the future, there is a sense in which this is taking place whenever people turn to Christ through our witness.)

Further, he ensures the word of Christ is not subject to futility. He cuts through futile thinking and futile living and brings people to repentance and faith.

As Paul later looked back his life, he testified, “But thanks be to God, who always leads us in triumphal procession in Christ and through us spreads everywhere the fragrance of the knowledge of him...And who is equal to such a task?.. Unlike so many, we do not peddle the word of God for profit. On the contrary, in Christ we speak before God with sincerity, like men sent from God. (II Cor. 2:14)

Again he wrote, “But thanks be to God! He gives us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ. Therefore, my dear brothers, stand firm. Let nothing move you. Always give yourselves fully to the work of the Lord, because you know that your labor in the Lord is not in vain. (I Cor. 15:57-78)

What's the point? That is the point.

The creation is subject to futility. Our lives can seem like sand castles. Everything we are trying to accomplish can seem to be so easily swept away. Except for what is of God and his Word.

Jesus said, “Therefore whoever hears these sayings of Mine, and does them, I will liken him to a wise man who built his house on the rock: and the rain descended, the floods came, and the winds blew and beat on that house; and it did not fall, for it was founded on the rock” (Matt. 7:24-25).

We see this in Paul. We encourage it in one another. We often speak of following hard after Christ in spite of persecution. This morning I speak of following hard after Christ in spite of the frailties and strains of life and human relations.

Lord, protect us from being futile in our thinking, self-defeating in the way we think or speak or act. Protect us so we can protect others. Help us so we can encourage others and avoid the trap of feeling sorry for ourselves.

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Thank you that the obstacles we face are not obstacles to you, that our setbacks are not setbacks to you. The gospel advances because of the triumph of Christ which cannot be diminished. Because of your grace to me, I am a part of extending your grace to others. Fill me with your Spirit, and help me find my joy in you. Amen.