

21. Roller coaster of Christian life

December 29, 2013

Some people cannot have enough of roller coaster rides while others already are hurling the dinner they had last night by just thinking about it.

While I prepared this sermon, I found several interesting facts about roller coasters around the world. The fastest roller coaster can travel 149 mph; the longest roller coaster drop is 418 ft drop which is equivalent to a 30 story building height in less than 5 seconds.

There is one roller coaster that was fascinating to me: the Gatekeeper in Cedar Point in Sandusky, OH. It is not the fastest, biggest, nor was it the baddest. But it pulls 4Gs, it has 6 inversions, and it features two keyhole points as it passes through two 100 foot tall towers at 67 mph. You do all these while your body is completely suspended in the air by a little seat and shoulder harness. Many people who rode this roller coaster would say, "It feels like you're going to get your knees and your head chopped off while you go through the keyhole points"

Well, that's all fun and fancy. You can get off the roller coaster and puke a couple of times, and then it's over. But the roller coaster of Christian life is not like that. As long as you are with the Lord, there will be ups and downs, twists in and out. The secret of this ride is trusting the One who holds the rail and the cart altogether. Getting off the ride is not much of a choice because it is in a bottomless pit with no hope where we all had been before Christ saved us.

On the first missionary journey, Paul and Barnabas took with them just enough to live on, sufficient clothing to cover themselves, hearts full of hope in God's truth, and total confidence in the Lord that would keep them faithful. That's what kept them together. That's what steeled them against the tightening jaws of mistreatment in the ministry.

Last week we learned that the persecution against Paul and Barnabas was raised due to the envy of the Jewish synagogue leaders in Antioch. Of course, the devil was behind all of this. This morning as we follow these two godly men to different cities, the persecution also followed them. Let's learn how Paul and Barnabas handled their difficult situations.

A. IN THE CITY OF ICONIUM

Acts 14:1-5 Now it happened in Iconium that they went together to the synagogue of the Jews, and so spoke that a great multitude both of the Jews and of the Greeks believed. 2 But the unbelieving Jews stirred up the Gentiles and poisoned their minds against the brethren. 3 Therefore they stayed there a long time, speaking boldly in the Lord, who was bearing witness to the word of His grace, granting signs and wonders to be done by their hands. 4 But the multitude of the city was divided: part sided with the Jews, and part with the apostles. 5 And when a violent attempt was made by both the Gentiles and Jews, with their rulers, to abuse and stone them,

Can you say that Paul and Barnabas were genuine persecution magnets? Iconium was located about 100 miles east of Antioch of Pisidia Region. It was more Greek than Roman atmosphere in the Region of Galatia.

The Lord granted His miracles through Paul and Barnabas as they preached the Word of God to these Jews and Gentiles. The signs and wonders were their credentials that they were indeed the servants of the true God. Faith cannot be based on miracles, but faith can be bolstered by miracles. The important thing is “the Word of His grace” that performs the work of His grace.

These two godly men were so sensitive to the leading of the Holy Spirit that they knew that it was the time to hightail out of Dodge City.

B. IN THE CITY OF LYSTRA

Acts 14:6-20a they became aware of it and fled to Lystra and Derbe, cities of Lycaonia, and to the surrounding region. 7 And they were preaching the gospel there. 8 And in Lystra a certain man without strength in his feet was sitting, a cripple from his mother's womb, who had never walked. 9 This man heard Paul speaking. Paul, observing him intently and seeing that he had faith to be healed, 10 said with a loud voice, "Stand up straight on your feet!" And he leaped and walked. 11 Now when the people saw what Paul had done, they raised their voices, saying in the Lycaonian language, "The gods have come down to us in the likeness of men!" 12 And Barnabas they called Zeus, and Paul, Hermes, because he was the chief speaker. 13 Then the priest of Zeus, whose temple was in front of their city, brought oxen and garlands to the gates, intending to sacrifice with the multitudes. 14 But when the apostles Barnabas and Paul heard this, they tore their clothes and ran in among the multitude, crying out 15 and saying, "Men, why are you doing these things? We also are men with the same nature as you, and preach to you that you should turn from these useless things to the living God, who made the heaven, the earth, the sea, and all things that are in them, 16 who in bygone generations allowed all nations to walk in their own ways. 17 Nevertheless He did not leave Himself without witness, in that He did good, gave us rain from heaven and fruitful seasons, filling our hearts with food and gladness." 18 And with these sayings they could scarcely restrain the multitudes from sacrificing to them. 19 Then Jews from Antioch and Iconium came there; and having persuaded the multitudes, they stoned Paul and dragged him out of the city, supposing him to be dead. 20 However, when the disciples gathered around him, he rose up and went into the city.

Lystra was in the Roman province of Galatia, about eighteen miles southwest of Iconium. This was the first of three visits Paul made to this city.

What apostle Paul and Barnabas did here was not the same kind of con artist work by some TV evangelists nowadays. An actual miracle by God happened and people were stunned. They did not go into these cities to do miracles, and then to preach. Rather, it was the other way around. They went to preach the Word of God and then sometimes there were miracles happened as the Lord chose to make them happen.

The miracle merely attracted attention, and in a way, it can draw unwanted attention. The miracle itself saved no one as I mentioned before. Jesus made it very clear for us in the Book of Matthew:

Matthew 16:4 A wicked and adulterous generation seeks after a sign, and no sign shall be given to it except the sign of the prophet Jonah." And He left them and departed.

In Greek mythology, it was common for the Greek gods to come to earth in human form, though they did not always do so for the good of man. The people of Lystra had a legend that once Zeus and Hermes visited their land disguised as humans, and no one gave them any hospitality except for one older couple. In their anger at the people, Zeus and Hermes wiped out the whole population, except for the old couple. This may help explain why the Lystrians were so quick to honor Paul and Barnabas.

There are two things I want all of you to notice:

1) Elusive Popularity

We often see weird, even flat out wrong things people say or do to be popular on TV or social media. Popularity can easily get into someone's head. We call it "15 minutes of fame." It is a human nature to be liked.

If there was a moment for apostle Paul and Barnabas to enjoy their popularity, this is it. They could justify, "Since they think that we are gods, they will listen to our teaching and they will be saved." But that was not the way God's true servants minister. Paul and Barnabas opposed what they were doing and boldly told the people that the gods of Lystra were "vanities."

Popularity is extremely unstable. As long as people like you, you are their favorite, but if you say or do anything against their likes or themselves, you will find yourself on their hate list instantly. To be liked by them, you have to be gutless, characterless, and truthless. What do you know, you just became a member of the Washington politicians.

One minute, Paul was a god to be worshiped; the next minute, he was a criminal to be slain.

2) True Grit

After this angry mob had its execution by stoning of Paul, the people who liked Paul including Barnabas were stunned and stood around the lifeless body of Paul in silence. They thought that he was dead for sure. Next moment, Paul started to move his head, hands, and feet. He picked himself up off the dusty ground, pushed aside the larger stones, wiped the blood from his face and hands, gathered his composure and walked right back into the city where he was dragged out to be stoned.

If they stoned you or me here in Sahuarita, what would it be our first reaction after we got up from the ground? Jump in our vehicles and get away from here as fast as we can. Not Paul. He went back to the pulpit to tell them more about Jesus again. Is this missionary determined or what? True grit.

In 13 years of ministry of our church, I've been called a few names. Some said that my teachings are not deep enough though they only came once in a blue moon. To be honest with you, if I teach the Bible to you guys any deeper, you would feel that you are in a Bible college. Those people always put blames on me and others in this church and they left the church because they thought that they were more spiritual. Were they really spiritual? Only the Lord can tell.

Listen to me: A ministry that lasts is a ministry that relentlessly perseveres through periods of enormous persecution. It is not fickle. It does not need the applause of people. It rejects being enshrined as a god. Authentic ministry delivers the truth of

God, no matter how jagged the edges or perilous the threats. The ministry of Paul and Barnabas dripped with that kind of determination.

By the way, Some theologians think that Paul was actually killed and raised to life again, because stoning was usually a reliable form of execution. It has been suggested that the heavenly vision described by Paul in 2 Corinthians 12 took place at this attack. It is entirely possible, but I don't know.

C. THE RETURN TRIP TO THE HOME BASE

Acts 14:20b-28 And the next day he departed with Barnabas to Derbe. 21 And when they had preached the gospel to that city and made many disciples, they returned to Lystra, Iconium, and Antioch, 22 strengthening the souls of the disciples, exhorting them to continue in the faith, and saying, "We must through many tribulations enter the kingdom of God." 23 So when they had appointed elders in every church, and prayed with fasting, they commended them to the Lord in whom they had believed. 24 And after they had passed through Pisidia, they came to Pamphylia. 25 Now when they had preached the word in Perga, they went down to Attalia. 26 From there they sailed to Antioch, where they had been commended to the grace of God for the work which they had completed. 27 Now when they had come and gathered the church together, they reported all that God had done with them, and that He had opened the door of faith to the Gentiles. 28 So they stayed there a long time with the disciples.

The end of Acts 14 chronicles the return trip Paul and Barnabas made back to their home base, Antioch. En route, they visited many of the cities where they had earlier preached the Gospel. They returned to the region of Lystra, where Paul had been stoned, then on to Iconium. They backtracked through Pisidia and Pamphylia, then down again to Perga and Attalia. Exhausted yet exuberant, they sailed across the deep-blue waters of the northeastern Mediterranean, destination Antioch – their first missionary journey made its way to the log book.

In all that Paul did, the glory went to God. He never forgot it was all about what God had done, not what he had accomplished. Just like that, the work may be ours to do, but the glory belongs to God. The responsibility is ours to embrace, but the credit is the Lord's alone. There's to be no embezzling of glory. It all belongs to Him. That attitude never fails to put everything in proper perspective.

D. APPLICATIONS

1) My challenge to you and myself for Year 2014 is to live a carefully examined life through the eyes of God in an unexamining age.

That will result in your maintaining a carefully examined ministry in a day when virtually anything goes. Whatever happens, keep your eyes on the goal. However difficult, don't quit. Though the obstacles are extreme, the stakes are eternal.

2) If your faith cannot make it through adversity, it is not real faith.

The faith that cannot be tested is the faith that cannot be trusted. Real faith gets stronger through hardship, not weaker. It becomes more resilient; it doesn't fall apart.

3) The essence of the Christian life is knowing God and walking with Him and making Him known to others.

It's about sticking with Him when your Christian life is a smooth ride or a devilish roller coaster ride with extreme twists and turns as well as up and down. It 's about walking with the Lord through thick and thin, and pressing on through every heartache and trial that happens to come our way.