

What's More Important Than Life?

Psalm 73, Acts 14:18–20

Acts tells the story of the establishment of the church after our Lord's ascension, fulfilling his words, "I will build my church; and the gates of hell shall not prevail against it." In spite of bitter opposition and official persecution, Christianity takes root in the Mediterranean world. Christ pours out his Holy Spirit upon his church, empowering ordinary people to be his witnesses "both in Jerusalem, and in all Judaea, and in Samaria, and unto the uttermost part of the earth" (Acts 1:8). While he was on earth, the Lord had warned his disciples that the world would hate them. They would be like sheep among wolves. This all is fulfilled in the book of Acts.

In our text today missionaries Paul and Barnabas have been run out of two cities—Antioch of Pisidia and Iconium—for preaching the gospel. They arrive in Lystra and preach Christ in the marketplace. A lame man who had never walked his whole life hears the message. The Holy Spirit reveals to Paul that this was a man that had faith to be healed. Paul commanded the man, "Stand up straight on your feet!" And the man didn't just *stand* up; he *leaped* up and walked, healed instantly by the power of Christ! The townspeople, concluding that the duo were pagan deities, begin to worship them. This was a great grief to the missionaries. As Chrysostom observes, "they were about to be called gods and so introduce idolatry, the very thing they came to destroy!"¹ Paul explained to the people that he and Barnabas were mere men like themselves, and that they must worship the true God only, but the people were still intent upon sacrificing to them.

In our text this morning, the whole religious atmosphere suddenly changes. A multitude that so lately worshiped the missionaries as Zeus and Hermes now turns against the men. They direct their rage at Paul and begin pelting him with stones, intent upon murdering him. As he lies there under the barrage of missiles, he stops moving and appears to be dead. They cruelly drag his corpse out of town, thinking they are now rid of him and his Christ. What caused this sudden change in the people's attitude? Luke explains that "Jews from Antioch and Iconium came ... and ... persuaded the multitudes."

Think of what this entailed. Here were men who willingly gave up days of pay and traveled at their own expense in a determined quest to destroy the apostle Paul. He was in their minds public enemy number one. Remember, the missionaries' method was to enter into a city and seek out the local synagogue, endeavoring to evangelize the Jews first. This is what they had done in Pisidian Antioch and Iconium. But their message offended many of the Jews. We read that in Antioch, "... when the Jews saw the multitudes, they were filled with envy; and

¹ *Ancient Christian Commentary on the Scriptures* (Olive Tree Bible Software)

contradicting and blaspheming, they opposed the things spoken by Paul. Then Paul and Barnabas grew bold and said, ‘It was necessary that the word of God should be spoken to you first; but since you reject it, and judge yourselves unworthy of everlasting life, behold, we turn to the Gentiles.’” In Iconium, “the unbelieving Jews stirred up the Gentiles and poisoned their minds against the brethren.” The missionary duo were following the principle that Paul would later express as “to the Jew first, and also to the Greek” (Rom. 1:16). These men wanted to persuade the Jews that Jesus of Nazareth was the Messiah promised in the Hebrew Scriptures. Sadly, most of the Jews to whom they preached did not believe. They did not want to rock the boat; they would continue to practice the Judaism that had rejected Jesus and had cried out, “let him be crucified; his blood be on us and on our children!”

The apostle John would later write, “He came unto his own, and his own received him not. But as many as received him, to them gave he power to become the sons of God, even to them that believe on his name.” The Jews, by and large, rejected Christ, the one who had come to save them from their sins, so they would perish eternally. But those who received him would become the sons of God and enter heaven.

Which side are you on? Are you on the side of the Jews who would reject Christ? If so, then you must live with the results of your choice. For the Bible clearly states that “he that believeth on the Son hath everlasting life: and he that believeth not the Son shall not see life; but the wrath of God abideth on him.” To reject Christ is to choose death over life and wrath over mercy. But to receive him and become his willing worshiper is to have eternal life with God in heaven. What a contrast! Here is Christ, the Lord and giver of life. God incarnate, he came from heaven to go to the cross and lay down his life for his people. All of us have sinned and are worthy of eternal death. As sinners, we cannot enter the presence of a holy God. But if we put our faith and trust in Christ, we can have the assurance that our sins were laid on him. He “*bore our sins* in His own body on the tree, that we, having died to sins, might live for righteousness” (1 Pet. 2:24).

Iconium was about twenty miles from Lystra; Antioch was further—about a hundred miles. Yet the Jews who rejected the message of eternal life didn’t want anybody to accept it. So they traveled at their own expense, taking days off work, seeking to persuade the Gentiles in Lystra to reject that message as well. How ironic that these Jews, who normally would not associate with Gentiles and considered them less than human, would go out of their way to enlist the Gentiles in their quest to destroy the apostle Paul. This is the devil’s work! The devil, having rejected eternal life, is, in the words of our Lord, on his way to “everlasting fire, prepared for the devil and his angels” (Matt. 25:41). In his hatred for both God

and man, his goal is to take as many people as he can to hell along with him. He wants to take you there too! Will you let him?

So the men of Lystra, enflamed with hatred for the apostle Paul, rose up as a lawless mob to cast heavy stones at Paul in an effort to kill him. Having apparently achieved their purpose, they dragged his corpse out of the city. It was a good thing that Paul had passed out: can you imagine the pain of having your skin and flesh dragged over a rough gravel road?

Ironically, the word for *dragged* is the same word used earlier in Acts 8:3, “As for Saul, he made havoc of the church, entering every house, and *dragging* off men and women, committing them to prison.” The apostle Paul, before his conversion, had been a maniacal enemy of Christ. He and his henchmen had forced their way into private homes to drag men and women off to prison. Now, having been converted by the grace of Christ, he himself is dragged out of the city in a symbolic rejection of the gospel. Yet after the hateful mob that dragged the body of Saul out of the city and left it in an open field, exposed to wild animals, had left, “the disciples gathered around him” (v. 20). The word for “gathered” literally means *encircled*. And who were the disciples? Why, converts in Lydia! The preaching of the gospel had won people to Christ—pagans formerly on their way to hell, worshipers of Zeus and Hermes, now worshipers of Christ. These disciples circled around the body of Paul, surely putting their own lives in danger: the mob had stoned Paul; they could turn against the disciples too.

But why do you suppose the disciples encircled the body of the apostle Paul—merely to get a closer look at the blood and gore, like rubberneckers who slow down to get a look at the wreckage of an auto accident? No, these new converts likely gathered in a *prayer* circle. Perhaps they were saying, “Lord, why did you let this happen? Look down from heaven and see your servant. Take pity on him and heal him!” And their prayers were answered. God raised him up. And in an intentional display of commitment to his heavenly calling Paul went back into the city. We can imagine someone saying to him, “Are you out of your mind? The mob stoned you once, and you’re going back in there?” But Paul, though a man of small physical stature, did not flinch. He believed our Lord’s words, “I will build my church; and the gates of hell shall not prevail against it.” The church must be on the offense. By the grace of God, weakness is made strength. The forces of evil had done their worst, but they must not be allowed to win. That Paul could get up from a stoning and walk away is well-nigh miraculous. Surely he had been strengthened by the power of God.

Chrysostom asked the question, “What wrong had Paul done to be stoned? He was announcing a kingdom, he was leading them away from error and bringing them to God. Such things are worthy of crowns, worthy of proclamations by heralds, worthy of ten thousand good things, not worthy of stones. And yet having

suffered the opposite, he did the opposite to what was expected. For this is the splendid victory.”²

How do we react when we are bruised? Do we give up? Do we retreat? Do we, as it were, crawl into a hole, throw in the towel and feel sorry for ourselves? Perhaps we have all done that at one time or another. But to give up is to act as if there is no God in heaven, to act as if salvation is something that we achieve solely by our own efforts. But the gospel comes to those who recognize that they are utterly without strength, that they cannot save themselves. Brothers and sisters, we can do all things through Christ who strengthens us! We do not have to give in to depression. In dependence upon Christ, we can be more than conquerors through him who loved us.

Yesterday I heard the story of a young pastor’s wife, Anita Smith. Her husband, Ronnie, served in a church in Texas and loved preaching, but the two of them longed to serve in a place that had no church. While pursuing language study, the opportunity came up for Ronnie to teach chemistry in a British school in Benghazi, Libya, which provided them with a work visa and an entrance into the country. This was a tumultuous time in Libya, just months after the U.S. Consulate was overrun by Islamist fighters, killing the ambassador and several Americans. Ronnie thrived there, ministering to his high school students and making friends with Muslim men. Anita gathered for tea with her women neighbors on Thursday afternoons. The two of them found the people of Libya very welcoming and open to talk about religion. They were known as Christians, practicing their faith in a Muslim culture.

In 2013, Anita and her toddler came back to the States to visit family over the holidays. Ronnie would join them a couple weeks later. Then Anita got a phone call from Libya with the shocking news her husband was dead. An eyewitness saw Ronnie jogging. A Jeep was following him. They went around a building, and gunshots were heard.

Within days of Ronnie’s death, Anita spoke on national TV in the U.S. about God’s love for the Libyan people, expressing forgiveness for her husband’s murderers. She also forgave the killers—in Arabic—in interviews broadcast all over the Middle East. There is a big hole in her heart as she raises her child bereft of a father. Despite her grief, Anita shows a remarkable confidence in God’s power and providence, reminding each of us that “Jesus is worth dying for.”³

Yes, Jesus is worth dying for! He is the Savior of the world. Those who follow him have eternal life. Those who worship him are welcomed into heaven. Human

² Chrysostom, *Homilies on the Acts of the Apostles*, 31, quoted in *Ancient Christian Commentary on the Scriptures* (Olive Tree Bible Software)

³ https://www.persecution.com/2021-12-anita-story/?_source_code=EM21L14A

life is a priceless gift. God is the Lord and giver of life. Christians are to be pro-life. We are to be champions for the weak and helpless. It grieves us when the governor of Illinois makes it legal for vulnerable minors to obtain an abortion without even notifying their parents. God weeps for the tiny humans savagely ripped out of their mothers' wombs, sacrificed on the altar of convenience. Surely human life is more valuable than convenience!

But there is something more valuable than life, and that is Christ! "For to me to live is Christ, and to die is gain" (Phil. 1:21). Christ calls his disciples to lay down their lives for him. Jesus said, "Greater love hath no man than this, that a man lay down his life for his friends" (John 15:13). The Savior gave his life for us. As the apostle John put it, "Hereby perceive we the love of God, because he laid down his life for us: and we ought to lay down our lives for the brethren" (1 John 3:16).

Throughout the history of the Christian church there have been many martyrs. Stephen was the first; we considered his story back in Acts 7. He preached against the unbelief of the Jews. Their fathers killed the prophets who foretold the coming of the Just One, of whom they themselves had become "the betrayers and murders." For courageously speaking this, Stephen was stoned to death.

When Paul was stoned, he miraculously escaped death. Something similar happened in the third century to a man known as Saint Sebastian. Born in France, he came to Italy and joined the Roman army in 283 AD to help other Christians who were being persecuted by the Romans. He was appointed captain of the Praetorian Guard under emperor Diocletian, as it was not known that he was a Christian. When Sebastian began to make converts, Diocletian accused Sebastian of betrayal and ordered him to be bound to a stake in a field and be shot through with arrows. The archers left him to die, but a woman named Irene found him and brought him to her house, where she nursed him back to health. Shortly after his recovery he went back to Diocletian to warn him about his sins, and as a result Diocletian ordered Sebastian to be clubbed to death; his body was thrown in a sewer.⁴

Toward the end of 2 Corinthians the apostle Paul writes, "From the Jews five times I received forty stripes minus one. Three times I was beaten with rods; once I was stoned" (2 Cor. 11:24–25). The stoning to which he refers is the stoning in Acts 14—a stoning from which he miraculously recovered.

The risen Christ tells his church, "Be thou faithful unto death, and I will give thee a crown of life" (Rev. 2:10). All those who are faithful to the end, such as the martyrs and confessors of the Christian church, will surely be given the crown of life at the last day. There *is* something more important than life, and that is faithfulness to Christ. Our sovereign Lord may require us to endure pain, suffering

⁴ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Saint_Sebastian; <https://thepersecuted.org/10-famous-martyrs-and-why-they-died/>

and even death on his account, but he promises to be with us and help us, comfort us and give us the strength to endure.

Some martyrs have endured unbelievable pain on account of Christ. According to one tradition, Bartholomew, one of the twelve apostles, was flayed alive—the skin of his body was cut into strips and pulled off; his body was left open and bleeding for a long time. After that, his corpse was beheaded and crucified.⁵

You and I may escape such barbaric treatment, but all disciples of Christ are called to be faithful, no matter what might befall us. Through the grace of Christ the apostle Paul recovered from his stoning and was able to finish his course. As he would say later in the book of Acts, “But none of these things move me; nor do I count my life dear to myself, so that I may finish my race with joy, and the ministry which I received from the Lord Jesus, to testify to the gospel of the grace of God” (Acts 20:24).

One preacher recently codified what he called “the missions law”: “we won’t reach people without sacrifice.” Every Christian who follows Jesus faithfully and wants to see people come to Christ will have to bear some measure of suffering.⁶ You and I will suffer. As Paul and Barnabas will say just a few verses later, “We must through many tribulations enter the kingdom of God” (Acts 14:22).

There is something more important than life, than comfort, than freedom from pain, and that is faithfulness to Christ. He is our heavenly King. He ordered every aspect of our life in eternity past for his glory and our good. At the final day we will be compelled to acknowledge, “He has done all things well.” Dear saint of God, know that you are important to Christ. He has a plan for your life, and it is the best plan imaginable. Amen.

⁵ <https://thepersecuted.org/10-famous-martyrs-and-why-they-died/>; https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Bartholomew_the_Apostle

⁶ *Christ-Centered Exposition Commentary* (Olive Tree Bible Software)