

GOD'S SAVING PURPOSES PREVAIL BY HIS GRACE THROUGH CALLED LEADERS

Acts 14:21-28

INTRODUCTION

I have three younger brothers and while I know that most of you will find this hard to believe, I am the smallest and physically weakest of the four Swanson boys. My inferior strength was put on display this last week. I joined my brothers at our hunting cabin near Minong, WI for a three day work project. We tore apart an old, dilapidated trailer and began building a small barn for storage. My two youngest brothers were picking up large pieces of lumber and telephone poles and moving them around with little effort while I was struggling to move much smaller pieces of lumber. In my normal work of being your pastor and in taking care of my family my weakness is not noticeable. However, when I undertake a large construction project, my weakness is very apparent. How I wished, during those days of hard labor, that I had much greater strength so that I could do the work and not grow so weary, so quickly. Strength equal to the task is what I lacked but what I wanted.

I wonder about you? Do you ever feel the need in your life for greater strength? I'm not talking about physical strength, but spiritual strength. Do you ever feel that you need a stronger soul, a stronger faith? It is quite easy, when life is going well and there are no hard things facing us to assume that we are as strong as we need to be. However, in all of our lives, circumstances and people come along that expose our spiritual weakness and show us that we need more strength. In our text today you can see that it is God's will that you have a stronger soul. We also can see in this text one of the ways, perhaps the chief way God intends to strengthen your soul.

This last paragraph of chapter 14 is the conclusion to what is commonly called Paul's first missionary journey. If you will remember, Paul and Barnabas were commissioned by God through the church in Syrian Antioch to go preach the gospel among the Gentiles. This they have done first on the island of Cyprus and then in the cities of Pisidian Antioch, Iconium and Lystra. It was in Lystra that Paul was stoned and left for dead by the unbelieving Jews and Gentiles. But Paul wasn't dead and the next day he and Barnabas walked another 75 miles to the southeast to the town of Derbe, which is where our text picks up the story. They preached the gospel in Derbe and made a large number of disciples and encountered no violent opposition, at least none that Luke reports. Now comes the remarkable thing in this story. They could have proceeded on the Roman road to Paul's hometown of Tarsus which was only about 80 miles further to the southeast and all downhill and then a short boat ride would have put them in Syrian Antioch which is where the paragraph ends. Syrian Antioch is where they want to go and yet, rather than taking the shortest route there, they take the longest. They turned around and walked back the way they had come which was a distance of about 280 miles, visiting the towns of Lystra, Iconium and Antioch where they had recently been opposed and almost killed.

Why take such a long way home and expose themselves to all that danger? The answer is to be found in vv. 26-27 and vv. 22-23. First, notice how Luke describes what happened to Paul and Barnabas in Syrian Antioch in v. 26: In Antioch "they had been committed (literally, "handed over") to the grace of God for the work they had now completed." In other words, God freely, contrary to what Paul and Barnabas deserved, enabled Paul and Barnabas to go do all they did; which is exactly what Luke tells us in v. 27. Paul and Barnabas report to the church "everything God did through them". So everything that you read about Paul and Barnabas doing in chapters 13-14 is the result of God's gracious, undeserved, unmerited, unearned favor. God graciously did it all through them.

What is it that God did through Paul and Barnabas when they took the long way home? Look at vv. 22-23. God, graciously, through Paul and Barnabas strengthened the souls of the Christians in the churches of Lystra, Iconium and Antioch. Right there is the reason for traveling 280 dangerous miles out of their way. There were groups of Christians, churches in each of these towns who needed to have their souls strengthened. There strength was not equal to the task ahead of them and so God sent Paul and Barnabas to them for the purpose of

strengthening their souls. My outline this morning is a little different. I'm going to construct a sentence one phrase at a time that will answer both how and why God strengthens the souls of Christians.

I. God graciously strengthens your soul...

Verse 22 literally says that when Paul and Barnabas visited the Christians in these three towns they "strengthened the souls of the disciples." Again, as I just pointed out, according to vv.26-27 everything that they did God did as an act of his grace and mercy. So if you are a Christian here this morning, God is right now and always at work to strengthen your soul. He is not doing this because of anything you have ever done or decided. He is not doing this because you have fulfilled some condition or followed some formula. He is strengthening your soul because he delights to be kind to undeserving sinners. A strong soul is a fruit of the work of Jesus on your behalf. When Jesus died upon that cross he not only obtained for you forgiveness of sins and being counted righteous in God's sight and the promise of eternal life but he also obtained for you, contrary to what you deserve a strengthened soul.

When you came to faith in Jesus you entered a spiritual weight training program. You entered into a process in which God himself is increasing your ability to trust in Christ, to hold fast to him. That is what we see in the second clause of v. 22. A strong soul remains in the faith. A strong soul is a soul that continues trusting in Jesus as he is revealed in his word. Therefore, strong souls are trusting souls. In a moment we will see one of the ways God strengthens our souls and we will see why he does it but for right now I want you to marvel at this fact: when you came to faith in Christ, one of the benefits, one of the perks of your salvation is membership in the best, most exclusive spiritual athletic club in existence. You entered into a program in which you have been given a personal trainer, his name is the Holy Spirit, who is Christ in you and he is at work now and always to strengthen you in the faith. You can see that it is Jesus by his Spirit who is strengthening you in the last phrase of v. 23. Paul and Barnabas, by prayer and fasting, entrust the people in these churches into the care of Jesus, the one in whom they had trusted. So you can see that membership in this training program is given to all who trust in Jesus.

It is so important to remember that having a strong soul, having a strong faith is not about what you do but about you depending upon Jesus to do everything for you. Faith is not a work. Faith is not what you do or decide. Faith is not a feeling. Faith is not having positive thoughts about the good things you want to happen. Faith has no power of its own. Faith rests in the strength of another, it depends on Jesus to be and do everything for us. All you and I do is lean upon, trust in Jesus. Once we do that we are enrolled in his strength training program and he begins his work of giving us stronger souls, stronger faith so that we will continue to trust in him. Next we will see one of the main ways that God graciously strengthens our souls.

II. God graciously strengthens your soul through his word taught and modeled by called leaders...

There are two ways that God shows us that one of his chief methods of giving us a stronger soul, a stronger faith is through his word as it is taught and modeled by called leaders. First, Paul and Barnabas are called leaders. We saw in 13:1-4 that God himself called Paul and Barnabas to do this work and in vv. 26-27 we are reminded that God, by grace, did all that they did. What was it that they did? They preached the word of God. They taught the people the gospel of our Lord Jesus Christ. Thus God strengthened the souls of these Christians by these called leaders teaching his word. I have added that they did it by modeling as well because of numerous statements of Paul in his letters. He tells the Thessalonian Christians that they became imitators of him upon their conversion. He commands the Corinthians to imitate him as he imitates Christ. He tells his young apprentice, Timothy who is serving as a pastor/elder that he is to "set an example for the believers". There is no question that it is through both the teaching and the example of Paul and Barnabas that God strengthened the souls of these Christians. They see Paul, rather than forsaking Christ because of his being stoned and left for dead, telling them about the greatness and goodness of Jesus in the same town where he was recently left for dead.

Second, right after we are told about Paul and Barnabas' strengthening work Luke informs us that they appoint elders in each of the churches. Why did they do that? The answer is obvious. Christians need regular, "on the

ground” instruction in and modeling of the gospel. God’s call upon Paul and Barnabas is for them to travel and preach the gospel where Christ is not known and establish churches. They continue to care for the folks in these churches. They will visit them again. Paul writes his first letter to these “Galatian” churches. However, they know because God has ordered it to be so, that every local church needs elders and pastors who will teach and live out the gospel day after day for the strengthening of Christians. Please notice the plural number. A local church does not need an elder, a pastor. Rather, every local church needs elders who can teach and model the gospel. It is God’s will that every local church be led by a group of men who are able and qualified to teach and to model the gospel. In addition it is his will that within every local church there are additional men and women who, while not filling the office of elder, fulfill the function of teaching and modeling the gospel to others in the church. As we seek to be all that God wants us to be as the body of Jesus here in Janesville, this is the main thing we are working on. Under Pastor Steve Krug’s leadership we are working to put in place a process that will ensure that we have a growing number of growing spiritual leaders, both men and women, young and old who are teaching and modeling the gospel among us, under the oversight of our elders. The Bible also makes clear that every parent is called by God to be an elder/pastor to his and her children. This is why we want every parent to attend our Faith Training Seminar. This is why our Next Generation Team is working to provide encouragement and resources to our parents so that we can be pastors to our children. It is also true that there are in the NT a number of statements that indicate that every Christian is called to teach and model the gospel to others in the context of our personal relationships. Learning the gospel from others and seeing the gospel lived by others is a chief way that God strengthens our souls.

Let’s think about how this works. We’ve seen that it is God’s will that you and I are strengthened in our souls. We’ve noted that means that our faith in Christ is increasing. How do you grow to trust, to depend upon another person? There are people in your life today that you depend upon, you trust, you rely upon who at one time you did not trust or depend upon. How is it that you have come to trust these people now when you did not trust them before? There is an auto repair shop here in Janesville that I always go to when one of my cars needs work. I did not know or trust these people when I moved to Janesville in 1997. Now however, I regularly depend upon them without question. How did I come to believe in them and how has my faith in them been strengthened over the years? After moving here one of my cars had a problem that I could not fix and so I asked several people whom I had gotten to know who had lived here longer than I where they went to get their cars fixed. Several people recommended this shop. They told me how they had trusted the shop to fix their cars and how their cars had been repaired in a timely and economical fashion. So, on the basis of their testimony I took my car to this auto repair shop. They not only fixed my car but were very informative about what was wrong and what they did to fix it. Over the years I’ve gotten to know them and most importantly they have regularly fixed my cars in a timely and economical fashion. They have been truthful with me; even telling me about things that could be repaired but recommending that I not spend the money in light of the age of the car. My faith has also grown in them as I have talked with others who have used this repair shop and have also expressed their confidence in these auto mechanics.

While there are some significant differences between how a person comes to trust a mechanic and grows in their confidence in that mechanic and how we come to trust Jesus and grow in that trust, there are also some significant similarities. First, people need to know that they have a problem which they cannot solve. That problem is our sin and God’s just anger against us for our sin. Second, we need to know that God has made a provision for our sin in the life, death and resurrection of Jesus. We need to know who Jesus is and what he has done and how we partake of his saving work. Third, once we have come to believe we have a problem we cannot fix and then trust Jesus to fix that problem we need to grow in our confidence in, our reliance upon Jesus. We need to keep trusting him. We need to understand how people who trust Jesus live. How does all of this happen? We all begin ignorant of our need and ignorant of Jesus. Therefore, we need people to tell us about our problem and about Jesus so that we can come to know him and know him better. We need to see Jesus at work in the lives of others. We need to see in the lives of others the ways in which Jesus has been faithful to them. We need to see how Jesus is personally faithful to us as we trust him.

While the main instrument through which we come to know Jesus is the Bible, the word of God and so each of us, if we are to know Jesus must personally give attention to this word, yet the primary place where we come to know Jesus is in the community of believers which is the local church. As we have the gospel explained to us and we watch the gospel lived out among us, our souls are strengthened, our faith grows. We get to know Jesus better, we see his faithfulness to others and we see him be faithful to us. While my personal study of God's word has been invaluable in my life, yet, it is without question that my knowledge of God and my confidence in him has been most affected by the things that others have taught me, both in formal and informal settings. My faith in Jesus, my dependence upon him has grown most by my hearing others describe him and his saving work and by my watching others trust him to be for them everything they need. So this is how God graciously strengthens my faith. But why do I need my faith strengthened? That is our last point.

III. God graciously strengthens your soul through his word taught and modeled by called leaders so that you can endure the troubles he ordains.

The end of v. 22 gives us the reason for why we need to have our souls strengthened, why we need our faith to grow. What is interesting about this verse is Luke tells us that Paul and Barnabas are "strengthening the souls of these Christians, they are encouraging them to remain in the faith" and yet the only thing he records them saying is "We must go through many hardships to enter the kingdom of God." Obviously we know they said more than this yet why is it that Luke only records this statement of all that they said to strengthen and encourage these believers? That doesn't feel to me like it is a very encouraging statement. Essentially they are telling these people that being a Christian requires suffering.

I think this statement is hard for Americans to comprehend. The reason for this is because we are consumers. We are daily bombarded with appeals from businesses and groups and politicians who want us to buy their products, support their cause, vote for them, support their policies. How do these folks who want our money or time or vote appeal to us? Do they tell us that if we buy their product or join their cause or vote for them that we will be in for a rough time? When we are told to buy the Chevy Silverado pickup truck are we also told that when we purchase it we can count on spending many days in the auto repair shop? When President Obama tells us to support his health care plan does he tell us that if we do it is inevitable that we will spend more money on health care than we do now and we will get worse care? You know this is not how we are talked to. We are told that if we buy this product or join this cause or support this policy then our lives will be better and richer and more meaningful. We are regularly promised a better life if we will trust in the products or people or causes. It is no surprise to me that it is our country that has created the aberration of the gospel called the health and wealth gospel. Our churches and airwaves are full of people selling Jesus with the promise that life will be all good when you trust in him. This is the exact opposite of what Jesus and the apostles said. Paul and Barnabas say that "we must go through many hardships to enter the kingdom of God." You and I need our souls strengthened, we need to be encouraged to remain in the faith because this is the Christian life. There are many hardships we must go through to enter the kingdom of God.

The word used for "hardships" is used in a variety of ways in the Bible. It is used to describe persecution and it is used to describe the hardship of poverty and being a widow or an orphan. It is used to describe the general hardships of living in this fallen world and it is used to describe the severe hardships that will occur just before Jesus comes back in the Great Tribulation. John Calvin says in his commentary about this word that it comprehends not only persecution but "all sorrows and miseries to which the life of the godly is subject; not because the faithful alone are miserable; because this is the common state of both the good and the bad..." This is in exact agreement with what Jesus said in John 16:33, "In this world you will have hardship."

The most difficult word in this statement is the word "must." The apostles say we must go through many hardships. Every English translation uses this word to translate a little Greek word that means, "it is necessary or inevitable." What makes going through hardships to enter the kingdom of heaven necessary? This word is referring to the divine necessity of hardship for the Christian. It is God's will that you lose many earthly pleasures because of your love for him and people. It is God's will that you be scorned by the world for following Jesus. It is God's will that you suffer all sorts of illness and accident and heartbreak. This was God's

will for his Son, Jesus and it is his will for those who are his sons and daughters through Jesus. Listen to how the apostles Paul and Peter say this in their letters: “If we are children then we are also heirs. Heirs of God and co-heirs with Christ if indeed we share in his sufferings in order that we also may share in his glory (Romans 8:19).” “Dear friends, do not be surprised at the painful trial you are suffering as though something strange were happening to you but rejoice that you participate in the sufferings of Christ so that you may be overjoyed when his glory is revealed (1 Peter 4:12).” All who are followers of Christ share in the sufferings of Christ. We do not know which hardships we will go through. We are not in charge of these things. But we do know that it is God’s will that we go through hardships on this journey into his heavenly kingdom.

I can tell you that this is a soul strengthening, endurance producing truth. God in his mercy, through the ministry of John Piper and of Puritan pastors like Jonathon Edwards persuaded me in the early 90’s that the suffering that comes to us in this world comes to us by the will of God for our good. It is knowing that we must go through many hardship that has enabled me to remain in the faith in the face of the great loss our family has faced in Jared’s injury and ongoing disability. Jared’s accident and disability are part of the necessary hardships that our family must go through to enter the kingdom of God. This is no random act. This is no pointless accident. Rather this is part of my heavenly Father’s good plan for my life through which I must go to enter his kingdom. While I do not know all the purposes of God in it, yet I do know that this is what God considers necessary for us. So I continue to trust that through Jesus my sins are forgiven and I am loved by God and destined for eternal life. I continue to trust Jesus to do all that he has promised to do.

What he has promised to do is to bring us safely into his heavenly kingdom. This is what makes this statement so helpful. Why continue in the faith if doing so means that you must go through many hardships? It is because these hardships are not meaningless but necessary for entering God’s kingdom. There is nothing better than entering the kingdom of God. To lose everything here, as Jared has but to gain the kingdom of heaven is infinitely better than having everything here and not gaining God’s kingdom. Only God knows what is necessary for me or for you to enter God’s kingdom. This life that we are living leads into the kingdom of God and so though it be hard, yet it will be more than worth it as Paul says, “I consider that our present sufferings are not even worth comparing to the glory to be revealed in us.” In that final and great day we will see why it was necessary for us to go through the hardships we went through and we will be glad we went through them. So we continue in the faith now in the hope of entering the kingdom of God when Jesus returns.

In the movie, “The Karate Kid” a young boy who is regularly beat up by a bully is trained to fight by an old man who is an expert in karate. The training program this old man engages the boy in is very unorthodox. The boy questions the wisdom of the old man as he requires him to do apparently pointless but incredibly difficult things. He does not understand why he should do these hard things. He cannot understand how it will help him to resist the bully. Yet he persists because of his faith in the old man and because he so desperately wants to be able to defend himself. The movie shows how his faith in the old man through the hardships of training lead him to the glory of victory over the bully. In fact, it is in the final fight in the movie that the boy discovers how the hardships of training were necessary for his final victory. So it is for us as well; we trust in Jesus in the midst of these hardships and we grow to trust him more as we learn of him and see others trust him so that we will gain the promised kingdom of God. On that final day, as we rejoice in the victory of our king Jesus we will see how these hardships were necessary and we will be glad that we remained in the faith through all of them.

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