

Read also Psalm 23

Ever go on a trip and then when you come home you sit around and talk about it?

When I was a child, every few months we would visit my grandparents. I knew granddad would be sitting on the porch watching for us. And, my grandmother always had a cake waiting. Then my mother and grandmother would stay up until the wee hours of the night talking. They would talk about everything!

Once my husband and I took a trip to China to visit some friends who worked there. My pastor and his wife went with us, so there were eight in our group. We went first to Hong Kong. Then we went to Beijing, then the more remote areas of Kunming, and Dali. With each stop we would have those times, usually around the dinner table, when we would regroup and talk, ask questions about God, and share about the things we experienced.

At our house, a firepot sits in the backyard. Periodically when our children were growing up, or now, we start the fire pit and sit around it and talk – sometimes for hours. Usually the men smoke cigars and we drink hot chocolate or tea and roast marshmallows. It's the best place in the world to talk about life, and important spiritual matters. Teens love to do this; in fact, our children's friends usually come over and hang out for those times of conversation.

In today's passage Paul and Barnabas return from their journey, going back through the towns where they had spread the message; to Lystra, and Iconium, and then to Antioch, and with each stop they get together with the believers and talk about spiritual matters; what they learned on the journey; what they thought about God. Let's hear the story: READ Acts 14:21-28

When we gather in small groups like they did, when we talk about our faith with one another we are strengthened. All of us experience God and conversation helps us interpret those experiences. So Paul and Barnabas, might have said something like, 'When folks were chasing us out of town, we felt like Elijah when Jezebel chased him out of town!' Or, 'we now know what Jeremiah felt like when he was thrown into a cistern by angry officials and left to die.' And we see a purpose. We connect. Together they and we assess our experiences.

One of the chief things Paul and Barnabas learned from this trip was, "It is through many persecutions that we must enter the kingdom of God."

John Calvin translated it this way, "Every human being without exception is subject to many hardships."

Notice that he says, "*many* hardships" not just hardships. God does not pamper any of us; or keep His children immune from trouble. Yet, even in hardship Paul and Barnabas experienced God's faithfulness and even miracles.

Perhaps they talked about a Psalm, like this: "Out of my distress I called on the Lord; the Lord answered me and set me in a broad place." and "The Lord is on my side to help me; I shall look in triumph on those who hate me" (Ps 118:5, 7). Those verses became their reality. God loves

when we cry out to Him in those times of distress. The choir sang about it – that your heartfelt cry to God is better than a hallelujah.

Have you had times when you cling to a Bible verse and it becomes real for you? Or, you might cling to someone else's words of encouragement when you are experiencing hardship?

When I had breast cancer and was going through chemotherapy it was very hard for me to pray. But friends came over and prayed for me. I had an older African American friend, now if she prayed for you – you felt like you were in the presence of God himself. And I confided in her, “Lou, all I can pray is, *Help me, Jesus.*” “That is good enough,” she said. That prayer, you see, was “better than a hallelujah.” And her words stayed with me, until I could once again pray.

And in this very passage it also says that afflictions for the believer lead to a happy and joyful end. The joy for Paul and Barnabas was that in hardship many believers were added.

That's how God works.

Alan Hirsch has written a book called *The Forgotten Ways*. In it he talks about the phenomenal growth of the church in China. At the beginning of the Cultural Revolution the church numbered about 2 million, but a few years after it ended, the church had grown to an estimated 60 million people.¹

A recent article in The Presbyterian News Service reports that although life is now easier for Chinese Christians, churches in China still operate with considerable constraints and yet the church grows. Presbyterian pastor Sung Nam Chun says, “They cannot overtly evangelize, so every member is an evangelist.” For example, church members own a restaurant where a group of young adults stroll from table to table dressed in choir robes, serenading patrons with Christian folk songs. “People are happy because we say ‘God bless you,’ not ‘God curse you,’” Chun says.² The food is really good too!

So despite the uprisings, the riots, even the stoning that Paul experienced, the church continued to go to the whole region to make disciples and many people believed.

Have we lost sight of that today? Have we forgotten our purpose? Making disciples is the whole purpose of the church.

I've been convicted by this. So I went to the Greek restaurant down the road and talked to the owner while having lunch one day. I said, “Come to church.” He replied, “You bring the church here!” That's exactly what the early church did.

These believers had a real sense of mission together. They belonged to God, and they called others to join them. They fasted, they prayed, and it was a shared mission. And, God expected them to go despite the hardship. Paul said, “I carry the marks of Jesus branded on my body”

¹Alan Hirsch, *The Forgotten Ways* (Grand Rapids: Brazos Press, 2006), 19.

²Jerry L. VanMarter, “Growth spurt: Church growing rapidly in Manchuria region of northeast China,” Presbyterian News Service, April 12, 2010, <http://www.pcusa.org/news/2010/4/12/growth-spurt/>, accessed 2/2/11.

(Gal. 6:17). “But it’s worth it,” he reiterated again and again. “So I press on for the prize” (Phil 3:12).

Peter had issues with hardship. He deserted Jesus when hardship came. But Jesus said, “Peter, if you love me, feed my sheep” (Jn. 21:15f). And Peter did. Peter said later, “I want to see that inheritance we have coming.” “I want to receive the crown of glory that never fades away” (1 Pet. 1:4, 5:4).

Do you realize the great blessing in store for you? It far outweighs suffering.

Hardship tests your mettle. Hardship shapes our faith; God calls us to stay the course at all times because that is God’s way of refining and teaching us.

Every disciple of Jesus Christ is shaped by hardship because our Master was shaped that way. (Heb 2:10)

But no matter how hard life is we are in good hands because every experience God gives us is to build us up into disciples. So hardship always has a purpose.

Now Paul’s greatest concern was to strengthen all the new believers in those towns of Galatia, so in each city he and Barnabas appointed elders for them. You will be happy to know the Greek word for elder is πρεσβυτέρους (from which we get Presbyterian). So we are Scriptural!

The job of elders is to strengthen you spiritually. You have wonderful elders at FPCD who work really hard. Their job is to give you God’s vision for the church. Elders are to make disciples; to lead you spiritually; help you stay strong, faithful, and live into God’s vision. It’s a constant and important job, and when you read their reports, which you have in your hands for our annual meeting next week, you will see that sometimes it takes plenty of effort to make it all happen.

We lose sight of the importance of discipleship. Have you lost sight of it? Our elders and leaders here are striving to make Jesus Christ the center of their own lives and teach you to do the same. They are committed to the task of enlarging His kingdom by reaching out to these surrounding neighborhoods. Why? Because it’s worth being a part of God’s kingdom.

Because when you belong to God, God is not going to ditch you, though others may hate you.

Because with God as my shepherd, I don’t need a thing! He finds quiet pools to quench our thirst and sends us in the right direction. He walks by our side. Even His shepherd’s crook which draws us back when we go astray, gives comfort.

He serves us a six-course dinner right in front of our enemies; he revives our drooping heads, and our cup brims with blessing.

God’s beauty and love chase after me every day of my life. That’s why I am a believer; an elder; and a pastor. And so I am at home here in this house of God, wanting to draw others to Him.

Together you and I, your elders and leaders, we can all sit around the firepot and encourage one another to do the same.

AMEN