

Through Much Tribulation  
Acts 14:8-22

I suppose in our modern world of “cancel culture” it’s rather commonplace for prominent people to fall from grace, at least where the social media mob is concerned. But has anyone’s popularity ever collapsed as fast as Paul’s? In verses 11 and 12, the whole town of Lystra was literally worshipping him as a god. But by verse 19, his once adoring fans were throwing rocks at him, trying to kill him. So what gives?

Well, what was it that caused the Paulapalooza in the first place? At the beginning of today’s passage, Paul was preaching, and a man who had been lame from the time of his birth was listening intently. Paul discerned that the man had faith to be healed, and he told the lame man to stand up. And that’s exactly what happened. No wonder the crowd was so amazed!

But perhaps the reason the crowd instantly began to worship Paul is that this sort of miracle fit right in with everything the Lystrans already believed. Remember: they were polytheists, worshipping the whole pantheon of Ancient Greek gods. But they didn’t worship those gods out of love or respect for them. No, they offered sacrifices to their gods in order to get something out of the deal. Through their worship, they were trying to manipulate their gods into giving them rain for their crops, food for their stomachs, and gladness for their hearts: all the sorts of things Paul mentions in verse 17. In short, the people of Lystra saw Paul the healer as a god, a powerful being who was able to provide for their material well-being. That’s why they were prepared to perform some ritual sacrifices so they could wheedle some more good things out of him.

But Paul wasn’t the only one who worked divine miracles, only to find that his audience was only interested in getting more material blessings. Remember our responsive reading this morning? John chapter 6 describes how Jesus was surrounded by 5000 hungry men – and that doesn’t count the women and children who were with them. And the only food available to that huge, hungry crowd was one little boy’s lunch: five barley rolls and a couple of sardine-sized fish. But Jesus was able to take that little bit of food and keep handing it out to the disciples to distribute so that everyone had plenty to eat – and there were 12 baskets full of leftovers besides! And what was the crowd’s reaction to such obviously miraculous providence? They wanted to take Jesus by force and make him their king, so that He would continue to meet all their material needs. How selfish and petty they all were!

But have things really changed all that much? No, modern people don’t kill animals and offer them to their false gods. But don’t lots of people still look to kings and other government officials to provide for them? And aren’t lots of people still only interested in the Church because of the sorts of material blessings that we often provide? Yes, even some who remain hostile to the Lord Jesus continue to be quite content for the church to feed the poor and clothe the naked and found hospitals for the sick. Mother Teresa is the only kind of Christian that most non-Christians respect, because, along with the hungry Galilean crowd and the Lystran mob, the things of this world are the only thing that matters to them.

Okay, so if we can understand why Paul’s healing miracle made him so popular with the people of Lystra, why did they turn on Paul so quickly? Yes, verse 19 blames Paul’s opponents from Antioch and Iconium for persuading the Lystrans and winning them over, but why were their accusations so convincing? After all, to most people seeing is believing, and the Lystrans had seen Paul’s ability to

command divine power to heal a man everyone knew had been lame. So why were they so easily persuaded to kill him?

Well, it probably wasn't so much what Paul had done as what he had said. For Paul hadn't just told the Lystrans that they had made a mistake when they identified him and Barnabas as gods and tried to offer sacrifices to them. No, he called all such sacrifices "vanities:" empty, pointless, useless things. In a word, Paul was condemning all of their pagan religious rituals.

But he didn't stop there. For he went on to challenge their most basic theological assumptions. Notice that in verse 15 Paul insists that there is a living God, not a whole pantheon of gods. Moreover, Paul claims that this one living God made the heaven, and earth and the sea and everything in them. So Paul wasn't just saying that the Lystrans didn't know the right way to worship. He was also saying they didn't even know the right God to worship.

But he went even further, making an even more absolutist claim about this one living God. For notice that in verse 16, he says that God suffered, God permitted all the nations to walk in their own ways. This implies that the One True God had only been putting up with all the nations' different religions over the years, but that everyone in every land really had always been obligated to worship only the one true and living God. Paul was thus elevating the God of the Jews above all the rest of the gods that the Lystrans had been worshipping for centuries.

But even that wasn't the end of it. For remember: polytheists primarily worshipped their many different gods for what they could get out of the deal, offering sacrifices only in order to gain material blessings. But in verse 17, Paul went so far as to say that all of the things they had been asking their false gods for, all the things in life that they thought were really important – their rain and fruitful seasons, their food and gladness – all these things were actually under the control of the God of the Jews, the only true and living God. It was only Paul's God, Paul insisted, Who could give the Lystrans any of the good things in life that they craved.

And so we see that Paul's message, however brief it may have been, struck right at the heart of polytheism. Paul was basically saying that his listeners had been worshipping the wrong gods in the wrong way for the wrong reasons all their lives. But on top of all this, he urged them to change their ways, to stop focusing on the creation, on the things of this world. Instead, Paul said in verse 17 that they should let all the good things in life bear witness to God, pointing them to the Creator Who alone was worthy of their worship and praise.

Could such a message still get a preacher in trouble? How would non-believers react if we were to insist that it's much more important to teach the hungry and the homeless about repentance and faith than it is to feed and house them? How would the followers of the prosperity gospel like to hear that Jesus doesn't promise material blessings to His followers? Indeed, how many of us would continue to follow Jesus if we really took seriously His promise of persecution for His followers, His call for us to give up everything for the Kingdom of God, to take up our own cross of self-sacrifice so that others might be saved?

No, when you look at Paul's message as a whole, when you really take seriously His denunciation of any religion that pursues only worldly ends, the real surprise isn't that the Lystran crowd turned on Paul. The truly amazing thing is that it took the Jews from Antioch and Iconium to persuade the Lystrans to try to kill him.

But Paul really couldn't say anything else, could he? For Paul wasn't just telling the truth. No, in his straightforward rejection of the Lystrans' worldly priorities, he was simply following the example of Jesus.

For remember, Jesus had done much mightier miracles than Paul ever did. Just this morning, we read about him feeding a vast multitude by the Sea of Galilee, and we know how he healed even those whose diseases were considered incurable at the time. In fact, Jesus went so far as to raise his friend Lazarus from the dead.

And it was primarily because of all those miracles that, as He rode into Jerusalem on Palm Sunday, the crowd welcomed Jesus as the Son of David, calling Him the One Who comes in the name of the Lord. Yes, on that day, the people of Jerusalem were ready to do what the John 6 crowd had wanted to do: to make Jesus their king.

But by Good Friday, the very same crowd was calling out for Jesus' blood, and basically for the same reason that the Lystran crowd tried to kill Paul. For by allowing Himself to be arrested, Jesus was making it plain that He had no intention of bringing the Kingdom of God to earth at that time, at least not in the way they wanted it. Yes, as Jesus stood meekly before Pilate, there could be no doubt that His people would get no instant freedom from the Romans, and thus no great material prosperity like that which the John 6 crowd had so greatly desired.

Instead, through His arrest and crucifixion, Jesus was proclaiming the same message that Paul preached: a message of complete devotion to God, a message of the supreme importance not of material blessings but of spiritual blessings – even though those spiritual blessings are often accompanied by the greatest of physical sufferings: even the suffering of stoning at the hands of an angry mob, even the suffering of the cross.

For isn't that the way Paul summed it all up in verse 22? "Through many tribulations we must enter the kingdom of God." But once again, this idea wasn't new with Paul. Jesus had told His disciples the same thing at the Last Supper as recorded in John chapters 15 and 16: "If the world hates you, know that it has hated me before it hated you. If you were of the world, the world would love you as its own; but because you are not of the world, but I chose you out of the world, therefore the world hates you. Remember the word that I said to you: 'A servant is not greater than his master.' If they persecuted me, they will also persecute you. If they kept my word, they will also keep yours. In the world you will have tribulation. But take heart; I have overcome the world."

Yes, the good news is that Jesus has overcome the world. The Jerusalem mob may have crucified Him, but He rose from the dead on the third day. In the same way, Paul rose up after being left for dead, and continued in the ministry to which God had appointed him, bearing witness to the crucified and resurrected Christ. And the good news is that, however unpopular Paul's proclamation may have been, he was absolutely right: the only true God has in fact revealed Himself through the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ. And there is no other name than Jesus' name by which we must be saved.

But there's a sobering question that remains for us: if tribulation, if suffering for the name of Christ is the norm of the Christian experience, how are we called to share in that suffering? Oh, sure, many of our foreign missionaries have no trouble answering that question. After all, our own Engage 2025 team has had to move to Budapest because tensions in the Middle East are so high. And let's not forget how Andrew Brunson spent years in a Turkish prison, just because he was trying to reach Muslim

people with the gospel. The perils many of our foreign missionaries face are all too obvious, both to them and to us.

And yet, every time we commission those missionaries at our General Assemblies, the last question the moderator puts to them is whether they understand the great dangers before them, and whether they are in fact willing to accept the risk of martyrdom for the sake of Christ. And year after year, without hesitation, all of them reply, "Yes." Oh, yes, they know that what Paul said, and that what Jesus said is true: it is through many tribulations that we must enter the kingdom of God.

But what about the rest of us? Do we really believe that? Sure, it's easy for us American Christians to engage in the sorts of mission work that makes us popular with unbelievers. It's easy for us to get involved in mercy ministries, feeding the hungry and housing the homeless – as long as we keep our mouths shut.

But are we willing to speak up for Christ? Are we willing to challenge the increasingly immoral culture all around us? Are we willing to call into question the vanities, the materialist idolatries of our modern world – and even of our own hearts? Instead of allowing the material blessings of the creation to distract us from God, will we use them to draw us to greater faith in our Creator?

Moreover, are we willing to call the world to confession and repentance? Are we willing to be called judgmental and exclusivist for saying without equivocation that Jesus Christ is Lord, that He is the only Way, the only Truth, the only Life, and that no one can come to the Father except through Him? Are we willing to be called narrow-minded and judgmental for upholding Biblical standards of behavior and worship? Are we willing to be seen as going to extremes, self-sacrificially giving of our substance and ourselves so that the gospel of the Lord Jesus Christ can go forth especially to those who have no Christian witness in their communities?

In short, are we willing to say the sorts of things that caused the Lystran mob to turn on Paul? Are we willing to challenge the world's priorities the way that Jesus did, even though His stance caused him to be crucified? Are we willing to stand with Paul and with Christ, enduring tribulations that we might enter the kingdom of God? Or will we go on clinging to the things of this world, vanities that are only passing away?