

*Words and Deeds: The Way Forward*  
*By Jason Huff*  
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*Mark 4:1-20; 1 Timothy 3:1-13; Acts 14:20-28*

Our final Scripture reading today comes from Acts 14:20-28. May God speak to us today through His holy and perfect Word. “After the disciples had gathered around Paul, he got up and went back into the city. The next day he and Barnabas left for Derbe. They preached the good news in that city and won a large number of disciples. Then they returned to Lystra, Iconium and Antioch, strengthening the disciples and encouraging them to remain true to the faith. “We must go through many hardships to enter the kingdom of God,” they said. Paul and Barnabas appointed elders for them in each church and, with prayer and fasting, committed them to the Lord, in whom they had put their trust. After going through Pisidia, they came into Pamphylia, and when they had preached the word in Perga, they went down to Attalia. From Attalia they sailed back to Antioch, where they had been committed to the grace of God for the work they had now completed. On arriving there, they gathered the church together and reported all that God had done through them and how he had opened the door of faith to the Gentiles. And they stayed there a long time with the disciples.”

Finding the way forward. I’ve never thought about that phrase much, and it came to mind when I studied this passage a couple of weeks ago to put together the month’s preaching calendar. So I do what I do with almost every topic I’m kind of curious about – I Google it. I was looking for an illustration or a story to start with today, something that might catch your attention. But what I found is that “finding the way forward” is an idea that is profoundly spiritual in our day and age.

The very first hit on Google was from the United Methodist Church as they try to figure out how to keep their large denomination together as so many different viewpoints have seeped into the faith from our world and our culture. I read about Samaritans, the first telephone support service in the world started in London by a pastor who wanted there to be a phone line for people to call when they needed help – a way forward. I learned about people who are trying to find a way forward out of poverty and into educational opportunities.

And I could rabbit-trail into all the other places and organizations looking for a way forward – from the cities of Ohio trying to reimagine themselves from their past to the government of Pakistan. Everyone wants to know the way forward. Because everyone is hoping for a better future, a brighter tomorrow – or at very least, some insight into what the future holds.

The early church that we see developing in the book of Acts needed a way forward, too. Now, we can look back and say that these Christians in Acts were instrumental in developing the church as we know it. They were the first church. Sometimes we idolize or glamourize the early church and think, “We want to be like the church in Acts.” I’ve heard that said by countless pastors and church leaders, major ones who influence the church at large. But the truth is, the early church struggled in incredible ways we don’t want to go through today. And the way that Paul and Barnabas helped them find the way forward is key for us today as well.

In a passage that seems really simple, there are a couple surprises when we pay close attention. The first one is the path that Paul and Barnabas take. If you were here last week, you remember that at the end of last week's passage, Paul had been stoned and left for dead outside of Lystra after he and Barnabas had been mistaken for Zeus and Hermes. The next day, they hightail it out of there – Paul is not eager for the uprising there to finish the job they started.

So they go to Derbe, which was always part of their plan, and they make disciples there just like they have at every stop along the route. Nothing much to say other than that they won a large number of disciples to Jesus. But here's where things get interesting. Paul and Barnabas return to Lystra, Iconium, and Pisidian Antioch. On my first reading, I was just like, "OK, whatever, more cities I don't know really know." I think that's very easy to do when we see a bunch of cities in a list we don't recognize.

But here's the fascinating thing – Paul and Barnabas go back the way they came. They go back to Lystra, the city where Paul was stoned! They go back to Antioch. If you think back all the way to November or so, we discussed how the journey they took was really treacherous, through dangerous mountain passes. It was so daunting, you might remember, that John Mark left them and went home. And there was a far, far easier route for them to get home to Israel.

But instead of doing that, Paul and Barnabas go back to the cities where they had shared the gospel. This time, their primary purpose isn't to share the gospel and to do evangelism – it's to strengthen the believers that became disciples when they first came around. And they do this through every city, stopping to preach only in the place they had passed through before but not shared the gospel.

They eventually reach Syrian Antioch where their missionary journey started, and they stay there a while as they decompress from their trip and share with everyone just how well the Gentiles had responded to Jesus. The way the Gentiles embraced the message of Christ will set us up for what we'll study next week, as the Jewish believers try to discern how Gentile Christians should act and what they need to obey from God's law.

So here's the first thing I want us to consider from this passage: *the way forward for the church is to grow broader and deeper – broader through evangelism and deeper through discipleship.* We have sometimes lost sight of the fact that it's a both/and. In the last thirty years, there's been a huge movement to make the church "seeker sensitive," to make church services appealing to people who weren't yet believers. Some of the changes were positive; I think the inclusion of modern worship music in the church is a fantastic thing.

The "seeker sensitive" movement also helped make us aware of how "churchy" our language can be sometimes and how we can drive people away from us not because we're weird or we're unwelcoming, but because we don't speak the same language. At its best, the "seeker sensitive" movement has helped the church reach people that weren't on our radar at all.

The problem with the “seeker sensitive” movement is that it often made the time of worship, Sunday mornings, into a time of entertainment and shallowness, where the message was so simple and so repetitive that a mature Christian could get little out of it. The gospel got watered down so that more people could call themselves “believers.” Some churches even said that Sunday morning worship wasn’t for mature believers. Isn’t that crazy? Ultimately, the worship of God isn’t supposed to be about us at all. It’s about God. We worship for His glory. It was easy for “seeker sensitive” churches to lose sight of discipleship, of working through the Holy Spirit to make fully formed followers of Jesus.

On the other side, other churches have focused on discipleship at the expense of outreach. It can become “all about us” and what we’re learning and how we’re growing, but never inviting others, never reaching out, where church becomes all about the people who are already in. That church eventually dies because once the people are gone, there’s no one new to take their places. All evangelism and no discipleship leaves people shallow; all discipleship and no evangelism leaves us without a new generation of believers.

Paul and Barnabas’ journey shows us that we’re not to do one or the other, but both. As we’ll find out, Paul goes on at least three more of these journeys reaching places that had never heard the gospel. At the same time, he’s writing the letters that make up the bulk of the New Testament mostly to churches he started or visited. He can’t be there; he’s not evangelizing there; but he wants them to be growing in their faith. Paul knew the church was to grow both broader and deeper, and his example shows that we should be about both too.

I want to encourage you to think about how you are helping the body of believers here at CrossWay grow broader and deeper. You know, we currently get a list of 150-200 people a month who have moved into the area recently, or have at least changed residences. We send two postcards to them within a month of their move. We could go to visit them. Or maybe you are working to reach people at work or at school. All that’s excellent. But we have to grow broader. And I encourage you to be engaged in Bible study, youth group, something that helps you grow deeper. The two together will help us be the church God intends us to be.

Now we get to the second major idea I want us to think about today: *the way forward to the Kingdom of God is through hardship and affliction...and to be encouraged by it*. Now hear that again...*the way forward to the Kingdom of God is through hardship and affliction...and to be encouraged by it*. Now if you’re anything like me, your first thought is not, “Makes sense to me!” No! You’re probably thinking, “Crazy Pastor Jason is at it again!” Believe me, this second point is not one I could make up. It comes directly from the text.

The encouragement to remain true to the faith and the strengthening relate directly to having to go through many hardships. It’s all one sentence in Greek; it’s all inter-related. Now this is not what we think of as encouragement. We think of encouragement as “go get ‘em!” “You are co-heirs with Christ!” “We can do all things through Christ who strengthens us!” And we do find that kind of encouragement from Paul in the New Testament too. And it’s good to hear that kind of encouragement from time to time. We need to go that God is on our side and working in us and through us.

But we also need encouragement to continue in the faith when things aren't going our way. In the parable of the sower we heard this morning, Jesus discussed how some people stick around until trouble or persecution come. Once the storms of life hit, they're no longer interested in the faith. Jesus says the same of those who get distracted by the things of this world and their anxieties over life and fall away too. Plenty of people have fair-weather faith. They stick around as long as things are good – when things get tough, they head for the door.

Why do we do this? I think it's because we often have the idea that God should be on our side...that if we love God and worship Him and obey and serve Him, everything in our lives should be better. We all know the prosperity gospel churches that take this to an extreme, but I'm not talking about them today. There's a sinful part of us that thinks that God should owe us something as His followers, or at least should make life easier to manage. And as Christians, it's often just the opposite – it's harder.

I want us to think about this carefully. All of us have experienced trials and tribulations; the word here also means anguish or suffering, so you can think of it that way too. Who hasn't? This is a broken world. In a broken world, people do broken things. We hurt ourselves and one another in all sorts of brutal ways. Broken people create broken things, which is why a couple of us have car problems this week.

Most everyone here has lost someone close to them, a family member or a friend, and that loss is real and painful and deep. There are days when I have enough anxiety about all that has to be done that it's all I can do just to get up in the morning. And I'm not a depressed person. I think it's true for all of us living in a broken world. There are trials and tribulations to get into the Kingdom of God.

But all of those are common to all people. They happen around the world to believer and unbeliever alike. The gear shift fails for the just and the unjust. Cancer and war don't suddenly make a U-turn around believers, as much as they wish they would, but they hit unbelievers the same way.

Some of us go through special suffering, suffering that comes from following Jesus even when it hurts. We live in a time and place where suffering directly for Jesus just happens occasionally. But if you look at China, you see something dramatically different. China in 2010 had 67 million official Christians in the state-run Three Self Christian Church. Back in 2006, Chinese Communist Party officials knew there were over 100 million Christians in the country. Estimates including the underground church run between 150-250 million Christians, potentially a larger Christian presence than in the United States.

In the last two years, crosses have been removed from churches. Buildings have been demolished. Pastors have been arrested. Churches have been told that they cannot congregate any more. Thousands have been told that Jesus won't save you, but President Xi Jinping will, so take down the pictures of Jesus and put up a picture of Mr. President. It's happening in underground churches and state-approved churches both. It's even gone so far that the Chinese can no longer buy bibles online, the one way they were able to get God's Word. There's even a Communist party order to re-translate the Bible so it fits with what the party believes.

Paul and Barnabas encouraged the believers because they knew that persecution and hardship of any kind could rock the faith of these new disciples. And we have to remember the same thing – God does not love you any less if you suffer for the faith or suffer in your life. As James said in his letter, “consider it all joy” when you face trials of many kinds because the testing of our faith produces perseverance. Don’t worry when things get tough – and they will – because God is with you through it. It is not a sign that God’s not there or that He doesn’t care. He will use it to strengthen your resolve, your faith, your character, if you don’t lose hope.

God knows that we need that strengthening and encouragement from one another. And that brings us to our final thought from this passage: *the way forward is together, with elders leading our way into the Kingdom of God.* Paul and Barnabas appointed elders in every church. They probably didn’t do this at first because they didn’t yet know who would be mature in the faith quickly and who would be respected among the believers. When they go back to each city, they appoint elders to guide each congregation. We eventually see each church appointing its own elders, counting on the Holy Spirit to guide them to choose wisely.

This is a pattern our church follows. In fact, the word “Presbyterian” in our denomination comes from the Greek word meaning “elders.” Our denomination calls me a “teaching elder,” meaning that my primary role is to do just that – teach and guide those under my care. Our church also has what we call “ruling elders,” elders whose job it is to lead through service to the congregation.

In the early church, the elders of the church were the ones responsible for the spiritual health and growth of the local congregation. They were to pray for the people of the church, make sure that worship and Bible study was regular, check on those who couldn’t attend or stopped attending, and provide for the congregation spiritually. Often, these elders were the ones actually teaching in the local church because pastors were a lot more rare.

Eventually and unfortunately, in recent years a lot of elders were chosen not because they felt lead to be spiritual leaders or were particularly known or respected, but because they were a warm body willing to fill a seat on a committee or because they had business experience. But that’s not what we want. Because the elders of a church are extremely important to the spiritual wellbeing of everyone here. In a small church, everyone kind of helps everyone else. Yet we still need folks we can go to and count on, who may not know everything but have committed to come alongside and help with what needs to be done.

Ultimately for us here, the appointing of elders was Paul and Barnabas, through the leading of the Holy Spirit, making sure each and every believers knows that someone has their back in this fight. Things are going to get tough. There will be hard times far worse than we expect. And yet there will be greater joys too, especially when we see the church come through in a crisis. And elders are one way that the church moves forward – they take the lead when the going gets tough so that everyone knows they are loved by God and their community of faith.

Paul and Barnabas’ journey brought many people to faith, and they were committed to making sure that, as far as it depended on them, those believers would stand firm in their love and commitment to Jesus. May we as a church do the same for those in our care.