

Sermon 1805

Acts 14.8-22

May 22, 2022

Ever wonder what they will say at your funeral? “A good man. She was a devoted mother.” Most of the people will say nice things. Back where I come from everybody says nice things. Everybody gets buried from a church—even if it’s their first time in it! Lots of donations convince the presiding clergy to hold the service as close to noon as possible, sort of like slipping a \$20 to the showroom maître de in old Las Vegas. Sometimes large offerings were negotiated to get old so-and-so into the right part of the cemetery, the part where the saved were buried. “John Strachbauer, um, I mean, John Strachbrewer, was a good man, a devoted father.”

Out here people are a more honest. If they aren’t Christians, they don’t pretend to be. So I know what outsiders (and the thought may cross a few believing minds as well, for none of us are immune from the world’s temptations) will say at my funeral. “If he was so smart, how come he worked so hard! What a dummy!”

I hope they say that at your funeral, too. And if I am not here to deliver it, consider this your eulogy! “What dummies! They had it easy but they took the hard way!”

#### Take the Hard Way

1. You knew it had to be done (8-10).
2. You knew it wouldn’t be fun (11-18).
3. You knew heaven was won (19-22).

“In Lystra there sat a man crippled in his feet, who was lame from birth and had never walked. He listened to Paul as he was speaking. Paul looked directly at him, saw that he had faith to be healed and called out, ‘Stand up on your feet!’ At that, the man jumped up and began to walk (8-10).”

Paul and Barnabas were on their first missionary journey, making their way through the highland Roman provinces of what is today modern Turkey. Last week’s reading gave us a glimpse of Paul’s preaching—the Savior God had promised to his people had come and, even though wicked men had put him to death, God raised him from the dead, as the Scriptures foretold. So believe in him!

Now we get a glimpse of the miracle power the Holy Spirit had given Paul. He had been preaching in a small town called Lystra. He had told the people they were in danger—they had not lived as God had wanted them to live—and that God had rescued them from their sins—he had sent Jesus, the Savior. A man had been listening intently to the whole sermon. In a way, he didn’t have much choice—he was lame from birth, had never walked. Paul had set up shop right in front of him! What a lucky day it turned out to be for him!

Gifted with spiritual insight, Paul could see that the man had trust in Jesus. Perhaps he didn’t know everything about Jesus, but he had trust that Jesus had helped him with his sin and could help him even more with his legs. Paul knew it had to be done. He had to perform a miracle to confirm this man’s faith and deepen

his trust in Jesus. The miracle would also immediately verify what Paul had been saying was true. The devil would not be able to shake this new believer out of his faith afterwards. Paul's message was not a nice distraction, sort of like a Saturday movie matinee. It was a life-changing moment that set the man's course for eternity.

Take the hard way. It would have been so easy to ignore this man, to finish up the sermon and head for the inn just before happy hour ended. It would have been so easy and everybody would have congratulated Paul for a job well done. He might have even fooled himself into believing it. But that wasn't the Savior's way. Jesus took the hard way.

Jesus had always focused on the one, the lost. Consider his parables. A woman tears her house apart looking for a lost coin. A shepherd leaves his flock of ninety-nine to look for the one lost sheep. Consider his actions. Jesus invites himself to the home of Zacchaeus, a chief tax collector, who now believes in Jesus—much to the disgust of the religious people.

That's why, when Jesus died on the cross, oh, yes, he died for humanity. He died for the world. But you know how that goes. The needs of the many outweigh the needs of the few. One or two always get overlooked in the shuffle. When Jesus died on the cross he died for you. He died for me. He died for every single person who ever walked or ever would walk the face of this earth. Everybody. Every one. If the whole world was perfectly sinless, perfectly holy, perfectly godly except for you and me, Jesus would still have died on the cross.

And what a reaction Jesus aroused! They called him insane. They said he was demon possessed. They tried to stone him. They tried to intimidate him. Failing in everything they finally arrested and tried him under cover of darkness. They executed him before people could sit down to a second cup of coffee. It had to be done. Jesus took the hard way. Paul was simply walking in his Savior's footsteps.

Take the hard way. You knew it wouldn't be fun.

To make a long story short, the people of Lystra go out of their minds when they see the miracle. But they don't rejoice in the Good News Paul has brought to their town. They don't embrace Jesus as their Lord and Savior, as this lame man had, to his great benefit. They think their false gods have finally done something, have finally come down to visit and help them! The priest of Zeus leads in steers ready for a big sacrificial meal. Paul and Barnabas manage to stop them. "This is exactly the sort of things we've been trying to get you to turn from!" The party was cancelled, but the hard feelings lingered. Nobody likes it when somebody rains on their parade.

Take the hard way. Ever since we were baptized we knew it had to be done. We had to live the Christian life. It was what we were made for. It was what God called us for. How did Luther put it in explaining the purpose behind Jesus' work? "That I might be his own and live under him in his kingdom and serve him in everlasting

righteousness, innocence and blessedness, even as he has risen from death, lives and reigns eternally.” Because Jesus thought of me, because Jesus reached out and saved you, one person is important to us.

How much time do we spend with our children? I know the answer from all of us will be a guilty, “not much,” but that isn’t true. Think of the hours they spent in your arms. Think of all the one-sided conversations you had with them. They learned to talk by watching your lips move. They learned to trust by your trustworthiness. They learned to love from the love you poured into them. You brought them to Jesus in baptism and kept at it, bringing them to Sunday School, having them sit next to you in church. As adults, they can scatter to the ends of the earth, but they will always be close to you, close to your heart, always in your prayers. Focus on the one. You knew it had to be done.

It affects our whole attitude towards life. We live in a “mass market” world. What appeals to the millions is what you shoot for. The small start-up has to ramp up if it is to make its dreams a reality. That is not the Christian life. Yes, we preach to the many, we teach to the many. That is only wise stewardship. A pulpit empty on Sunday morning because the pastor is delivering groceries to a shut-in shows a lack of priorities and abilities. But so is not having any time, any “give” in the budget to address the needs of individuals. Prosperity comes to the many, usually in the same way. Hardship comes to the one and each in a unique way. The hard way recognizes that. You knew it had to be done.

You also knew it wouldn’t be fun. Denying our sinful human nature never is. The sinful nature will never give up and admit that we were right to do it God’s way. It will whine the soup is too hot, then it is too cold. The sinful human nature always wants it both ways. But the greater heartache is the reaction of the wicked world. They honestly think we are crazy, maybe demon possessed. We have and will lose false friends along the way because “we take our religion too seriously.” To be in church every Sunday? Don’t you want your kids on a traveling team? To refuse after work get-togethers at the gentlemen’s club? Don’t you want to bond? To turn me in to the HOA because my side hustle repairing cars out of my garage? I thought we were buddies! To tell me you do not believe the god I worship is real? Who’s the hater now!

That’s why heaven is going to be so wonderful. We will never have the wicked world, the devil or our sinful human nature making our existence miserable.

Take the hard way. You knew heaven was won.

Just when you can’t imagine it could get any worse for Paul, it does.

“Then some Jews came from Antioch and Iconium and won the crowd over. They stoned Paul and dragged him outside the city, thinking he was dead. But after the disciples had gathered around him, 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 (19-22).”

Take the hard way. You knew heaven was won.

If I didn’t make it clear earlier, let me try one more time. We take the hard way, not in order to win heaven, as if it can be earned or gained by our own efforts. We take the hard way because Jesus won heaven for us. Jesus has done the hard work only he could do, dying for our sins on the cross, suffering the punishment we deserved. Because of that, we can focus on other things.

I am torn between amazement at the vehemence of Paul’s enemies—they are dogging his every step in this missionary journey—and their ineptitude. How can you leave a man you want to kill half-dead?

Paul is not a favorite of the crowds at Lystra. He rained on their parade and refused to let the priest of Zeus throw a big party to worship him. The kill-joy. All it took was the arrival of Paul’s Jewish enemies from Antioch to egg them on. A riot starts. They grab Paul and put him in the middle of a circle. They throw rocks at his head until he is unconscious, not moving. Luke, the author of Acts, doesn’t say this is a miracle, so we take it that the mob and the Jewish enemies of Paul were slipshod. Paul was only half-dead as they dragged him outside the city walls for the wild animals to dispose of. The believers came out to bury Paul, but he came to! And got up! And walked back into the city! Is he trying to have two near-death experiences in a day? The believers hustle him out of town the next day. He and Barnabas retrace their steps, strengthening the new churches that had formed around their preaching. And the big lesson? “We must go through many hardships to enter the kingdom of heaven.”

Yes, we must. In an age when any hardship, any sacrifice is too much to bear, group think says, “If it is hard, you are doing it wrong.” If it is hard, we are doing it right. We are not spiritual juvenile delinquents. We are God’s children, so he disciplines us. We are not friends with the world. So we go against the grain. We didn’t go out of our way to stir up the animosity. The very way we live makes the ungodly feel guilty. Heaven is won. We will have it easy there, but until we get there, we will

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So there you have it. Your eulogy, brothers and sisters in the faith, you lovable, wonderful, forgiven, sacrificing, hard-working smart cookies!