

ACTS 14:8–22. (EHV)

In Lystra there was a man who was sitting down because he had no strength in his feet. He had never walked because he was lame from birth. When he was listening to Paul as he was speaking, Paul looked at him closely and saw that he had faith to be healed. Paul said in a loud voice, “Stand up on your feet!” And the man jumped up and began to walk. When the crowds saw what Paul had done, they raised their voices, saying in the Lycaonian language, “The gods have come down to us in human form.” Barnabas they called Zeus, and Paul they called Hermes, because he was the main speaker. The priest of Zeus, whose temple was just outside the city, brought bulls and garlands to the city gates, because he wanted to offer sacrifices along with the crowds. But when the apostles Paul and Barnabas heard about this, they tore their clothes and rushed into the crowd, shouting, “Men, why are you doing these things? We too are men with the same nature as you. We are preaching the good news to you so that you turn from these worthless things to the living God, who made the heaven, the earth, the sea, and everything in them. In past generations he allowed all the nations to go their own ways. Yet he did not leave himself without testimony of the good he does. He gives you rain from heaven and crops in their seasons. He fills you with food and fills your hearts with gladness.” Even though they said these things, they had a hard time stopping the crowds from sacrificing to them. Then some Jews came from Antioch and Iconium and persuaded the crowds to stone Paul. When they thought he was dead, they dragged him out of the city. But after the disciples had gathered around him, he stood up and went into the city. The next day, he left with Barnabas for Derbe. After they preached the good news in that city and had gathered many disciples, they returned to Lystra, Iconium, and Antioch, strengthening the souls of the disciples and encouraging them to continue in the faith. They told them, “We must go through many troubles on our way to the kingdom of God.”

In the year 8 AD, when Jesus was only about a nine-year-old boy, the Roman poet Ovid published his epic poem *Metamorphoses*. In its fifteen books—what we would call chapters today—he chronicled in poetic form all the metamorphoses or transformations in Greek and Roman mythology. In story after story, he told how humans had supposedly been transformed into trees, rocks, flowers, animals, constellations, and even gods. In one story in Book 8, he told how a husband and wife, Philemon and Baucis, had been transformed into an oak and a linden tree growing side by side near a marsh in the Phrygian hills.

Here's how that metamorphosis allegedly happened: Zeus, the chief god, and his son Hermes, the messenger god, disguised themselves as humans and visited a thousand homes in the area of Phrygia seeking rest. But the people were all inhospitable, except for one elderly couple, Philemon and Baucis, who lived contentedly by themselves in a humble cottage. They invited the two men in to rest on their modest willow couch, while they prepared as nice of a meal as they could for them. When they had set a bowl of mediocre wine in front of their guests, and noticed that it kept refilling all by itself, they realized that their two guests were gods, and they begged them not to be angry at their meager hospitality. But Zeus and Hermes were not angry with them. They said they were going to punish everyone in the surrounding area except them, since they

were the only ones who showed any kindness. They told the couple to leave and climb a tall mountain in the distance. They did so, and when they were nearly to the top, they looked back and saw that their homeland had been flooded, except for their house, which was transformed into a temple.

The gods then told them to ask them for any favor, and the old couple merely asked to be Zeus's priests and to stand guard in his new temple, and that they would die at the same time so that neither of them would ever have to see the other buried. Zeus granted their request. After they had served at his temple for a number of years, they both were transformed into trees at the same time at an extremely old age.

Not quite forty years after Ovid made this story popular, two strangers entered the city of Lystra in Lycaonia. Lystra had a temple dedicated to Zeus just outside its walls, and Lycaonia was not far from Phrygia, where the story of Philemon and Baucis had taken place. These two strangers were the apostle Paul, a shorter man who did most of the talking, and Barnabas, a more impressive-looking man who accompanied him. When Paul then healed a man in Lystra who had never walked before in his life, the people of Lystra seem to have called Ovid's story to mind and they didn't want to make the same mistake the Phrygians had. Their reaction, and the reaction of some Jews who showed up later, and Paul and Barnabas' reactions to both, add some weight to, and put some flesh on, Paul and Barnabas's encouragement to their fellow believers, and to us, to **"continue in the faith."**

1. Deflecting glory to God

We first see from Paul and Barnabas that continuing in the faith means giving glory to God and not taking whatever glory we can get for ourselves. Paul had certainly done an amazing thing. Of course, it was God who had actually done it through him, but what God had done through Paul was amazing. This man was disabled in his feet and had never walked his whole life. So he sat wherever he went in Lystra day after day. On this particular day, he was listening to Paul preach the good news about Jesus. Paul looked at him closely and, using the special gifts God had given him as an apostle, saw that he had faith in Jesus as his Savior. So Paul said to him in a loud voice, "Stand up straight on your feet!" And the man didn't just stand up. He jumped up and began walking all around.

The miracle here is not just that the man now had the physical ability to walk, but that he also immediately knew how to do it, even though he had never performed that function in his entire life. I'm the oldest of eight children. When my next oldest brother first figured out how to walk as a toddler, he had all the ability in the world, but he had no idea how to stop, so he had to deliberately walk into walls and appliances so that he would fall down and stop walking and give his little body and little legs some rest. No problems like that with this man.

But when the crowds in the area saw what Paul had done, they thought that, just like in the story of Philemon and Baucis, Zeus and Hermes had once again come down as humans in disguise. They called Paul Hermes and Barnabas Zeus, and they called upon the priest of Zeus to offer sacrifices to them.

Think about the fame and the glory they had in that moment. It's the kind of fame that so many seem to be starving for today. I notice that even in YouTube comments, if someone's comment gets 100 Likes or more, often the commenter will go back and edit his or her comment

and add something like, “Whoa, I’ve never gotten this many Likes before. This is awesome. Thanks, everyone!” And even though it sounds polite, it betrays that the person kept going back again and again after typing the comment to check on how much attention the comment was getting. That kind of thirst for attention is pathetic, but it’s a pathetic we can all relate to.

Even though attention like that might be relatively harmless, the thirst for fame that it represents is much more dangerous, because fame can so easily turn into idolatry. We see that danger here. Paul and Barnabas had all the Likes, but the liking was so intense that the people wanted to worship them as gods. And it might seem like that reaction is so extreme that it would be easy for us to deflect and dismiss it today, but if they’re ready to sacrifice to them, think about everything else they could have gotten if they just let it pass. Think about the food and drink they could have enjoyed. Think about the accommodations they could have enjoyed. Think about the favors and pleasures that people would have given them either as acts of worship or in order to share in some of their fame. Right after Paul had been converted, Jesus had told Paul, through Ananias, that he was going to show Paul how much it was necessary to suffer for his name. Here was an opportunity to skip out on all the suffering and to bask in glory and live the good life.

There was just one problem. As soon as they would have accepted the worship of these people, they would have lost their God-given ability to perform miracles because, more importantly, they would have lost their faith in God. You cannot both trust in God and insist on trying to replace him at the same time.

So Paul and Barnabas did right by tearing their clothes and rushing into the crowd and doing everything they could to dissuade them from sacrificing to them. They not only stressed they were humans with the same nature they had, but they were even so bold as to call their religion and sacrifices “worthless things,” which they were. “We are preaching the good news to you so that you turn from these worthless things.” Continuing in the faith means deflecting glory from ourselves and giving glory to God.

2. Through many tribulations

Before they came to Lystra, Paul and Barnabas had been in Antioch in Pisidia. Luke almost seems to give the impression that some Jews from Antioch showed up in Lystra while the crowds were trying to sacrifice to Paul and Barnabas. But that probably isn’t what happened. Word probably spread quickly along the trade routes about these two men who had healed the lame man in Lystra and to whom the crowds had tried to sacrifice. And the Jews from Antioch, who had caused trouble for Paul and Barnabas there and had caused their expulsion from that city, realized that these two men in Lystra must be Paul and Barnabas. So they now came to Lystra and persuaded the crowds to stone Paul.

We don’t know how they persuaded them to do this after the crowds had been ready to sacrifice to him as a god. But it shouldn’t surprise us. Crowds are fickle. Many of the same people who think the vaccine should have been mandatory for everyone are now saying what in light of the upcoming Supreme Court decision on abortion? “My body, my choice.” Regardless of your position on the COVID-19 vaccine, you all realize that you cannot be in favor of mandatory vaccines the one moment, and then the next moment argue against abortion restrictions with, “My body, my choice.” Those two positions are inconsistent. Yet people do argue like that. Crowds have always been fickle. Perhaps the Jews persuaded the crowds that

Paul performed miracles by some sort of dangerous or demonic power. And maybe it wasn't too difficult for them to believe because, after all, Paul had called their religion worthless.

So they stoned Paul. They picked up stones and chucked them at him—chucked them long enough and hard enough that they thought he was dead and dragged him out of the city for the scavenger animals to prey on his carcass. But the disciples gathered around him, no doubt with much prayer, and he stood up and went into the city. He wisely left the next day...

...and what then? What would you have done? Called it quits and entered a different occupation? Gone to a completely different mission field at the very least, right? Not Paul. He wasn't disheartened. He didn't lose his joy in the gospel or his zest for gospel ministry. He left with Barnabas the next day for nearby Derbe, preached the good news there and gathered many disciples, then *returned* to Lystra, Iconium, and Antioch—all cities where they had been persecuted. And then Paul eventually returned to all those same cities on his second missionary journey! And what was his and Barnabas's message as they returned on this journey? They strengthened the souls of the disciples and encouraged them to *continue* in the faith, to *remain firm* in the faith. That means going through tough times. And it didn't just mean that for Paul and Barnabas, or just for public ministers in general. "They told them, 'We must go through many troubles on our way to the kingdom of God.'" Paul said the same thing to Timothy later: "Everyone who wants to live a godly life in Christ Jesus will be persecuted," he said—persecuted by the devil and his demons and persecuted by the unbelieving world.

Paul and Barnabas are giving us the same encouragement today: You can only continue in the faith through many tribulations. If you don't continue in the faith that way, then you're not continuing in the faith. You're like the seed that fell on the rocky ground or among the thorns in Jesus's parable of the sower, believing for a time, rejoicing in the gospel for a while, but eventually favoring the approval of others and an easy life in the world, a life of pleasure, over the difficulties that attend following Jesus.

3. In the living God

But why continue in the faith? Why go through all this for Jesus? Why forfeit opportunities for personal fame and glory for him? Why go through many tribulations, yes, even risk life and limb for him? Paul tells us: "We are preaching the good news to you so that you turn from these worthless things to the living God." The God whom our faith is in is the only God who actually, really lives. It isn't Zeus or Hermes or any winner of *American Idol* or any politician who gives us rain from heaven and crops in their seasons. And it sure isn't just some fortunate accident. It isn't Zeus or Hermes or anyone or anything else that fills our bodies with food and fills our hearts with gladness. It isn't Zeus or Hermes that gives us the firm confidence that all of our sins are forgiven and paid for. It isn't Zeus or Hermes that gives us the firm confidence that we're on our way to the kingdom of God, where all our troubles will have an end and God will wipe away every tear from our eyes, and therefore that not even death can harm us.

You can only *continue* in the faith, remain firm in the faith, persevere in the faith, if your faith is in the right object, an absolutely dependable object. There is only one right object for your faith—the living God. The God who took on human flesh in our history and who was crucified for all your sins in front of many eyewitnesses. The God who rose from the dead three

days later and appeared alive and well to many eyewitnesses, more than 500, in fact. This isn't just some character in an epic poem, who supposedly did these things years ago because a famous author heard it from a reliable guy. This is the living God, your Savior-God, who now reigns on high as King of kings and Lord of lords, who is the lamp of the eternal city, and who has graciously written your name in his Book of Life.

For all the troubles we must endure in this life as we follow him, as Peter once said, where else are you going to go? Only one God is the true and living God, only one God has the words of eternal life, and it's this one. So continue in the faith in him, giving glory not to yourself but to him, through many hardships, on your way to his beautiful, eternal, and glorious kingdom. Amen.