

Joy Marches Victorious Over Circumstance

Acts 14:8-22 • 2022-05-22 • 2022 Easter Series "Victorious"



There was a paraplegic who sat in the streets at Lystra, a town in the ancient Roman province of Galatia. Scripture doesn't mention his name. But it does mention some important truths. From the moment of his birth, he had been unable to take a single step. But he recently had experienced another type of birth. He had been born again by the power of the gospel. The apostle Paul was walking through Lystra and looked at this man. Paul saw that he wasn't looking at just another poor man. He was looking at someone who had overcome all circumstances and found joy through faith in Jesus. *"Paul looked directly at the man and saw that he had faith."*

That man became an example of a truth which still gives us joy today. All who believe the gospel have a joy which is victorious over circumstance. It doesn't matter if you are in pain, poverty, or paralyzed. It doesn't matter if you feel like you are going through some of the greatest hardships. With the gospel, everything changes. It was true for that paraplegic, it was true for the apostle Paul, and it remains true for you and all believers. Today we'll look at what happened on that eventful day in ancient Lystra, and we'll see how joy marches victorious over circumstance.

A few weeks ago, we discussed the conversion of Paul. Do you recall what life was like for him after that event? After he came to faith Paul wasn't always welcomed with enthusiasm. In fact, he gained a lot of new enemies. Paul had to flee from places like Damascus because people plotted to kill him. Years after his conversion Paul ended up at Antioch in Syria, where Christians were first called Christians. At Antioch the Holy Spirit told the church to send out Paul and Barnabas as missionaries. They had what we call a "divine call." By the Spirit and through his Church they were called to be missionaries and sent to the non-Jewish, Gentile people. So, they set out on their first missionary journey.

After first sailing to the island of Cyprus they eventually ended up in the Roman province of Galatia, which today is Anatolia in modern central Turkey. They walked through mountains and valleys around a hundred miles and arrived at Pisidian Antioch. There they began preaching the good news about the risen Lord Jesus. Acts 13 records one of the longer portions of one of Paul's sermons. At first, he was welcomed! The whole city eventually gathered to hear him. The word of the Lord began to spread all across the region. But just as things seemed to be going well Paul's enemies stirred up persecution. The missionaries had to leave Antioch.

Then they arrived at Iconium. Many people believed the gospel. But once again persecution arose. This time Paul's life was threatened. I'm sure he must have felt exhausted. By now he had travelled a long journey on foot since landing ashore. The trip was the equivalent of going on foot from Phoenix to Payson, and then on toward Pinetop. Finally, after walking for miles and being persecuted in each town, Paul climbed up and down the mountains until he reached Lystra which was roughly the same elevation as Payson. He had faced false teachers, persecution, and opposition from many. He had been driven out of towns for fear of losing his life. But despite all this we can read at the end of Acts 13 a picture of their attitude even in such difficult circumstances, *"The disciples were filled with joy and with the Holy Spirit."* Why? They had the gospel, and it was giving joy despite all the circumstances.

We hold to the same gospel and are filled with the same Spirit. Do we have the same fill of joy in all circumstances? Life's hardships might at times make us forget about the message we have. It is a life-changing message of joy!

At Lystra one man quickly discovered that truth. The apostle Paul had come for his first visit to Lystra. A man who was unable to walk from birth was listening to him. Paul looked directly at him and saw that he had faith. Even though this man had spent his whole life in hardship and wondering why he was unable to walk, he didn't have to wonder anymore. He heard the gospel. And despite all the challenges of life and his circumstances, he believed.

The Lord wanted to make it known that this man had believed a powerful life-changing message. So, he allowed Paul to heal the man, who at once leapt to his feet and began to walk. Now Paul really had everyone's attention. When the crowds saw what he had done they were moved to sudden excitement. They shouted in the Lycaonian language, "The gods have come down to us in human form!" Something clearly had been lost in translation! Before too long they had labeled Paul as the Greek god Hermes and Barnabas as Zeus. Scholars will point out that there was an old legend already in this town in which these two gods came to visit. They were not welcomed so they struck down every house that didn't welcome them. This could help explain why the people of Lystra leapt into action to welcome Paul and Barnabas, now rumored to be Hermes and Zeus. Many people in the town would have understood the Greek of Paul and Barnabas. But their first language was different. And with that they now spread rumors like wildfire. It got so carried away that Paul and Barnabas soon saw the priest of Zeus had come with bulls to offer sacrifice!

Once they realized what was going on Paul and Barnabas made it clear they were not anything but ordinary people coming to share good news from an extraordinary God. They were telling the people to turn away from all their worthless false gods to the one true God.

Before long the enemies of Paul arrived and stirred up the crowd against him. This time they succeeded in pelting him with stones and dragged him outside the city, thinking he was dead. I don't know if you've ever had an eventful day but imagine going from being treated like a god to being tossed out with the trash all in a whirlwind of confusion. Imagine going from preaching the gospel and healing a man to being rejected by nearly an entire town! Paul had to have been wondering as he lay there feeling dead, like a piece of rotten meat dragged out of town and left on the garbage heap. "God, I came all this way, preached all this time, even healed that man... for what?!"

Have you ever looked at the events in your life and wondered, "God, if you knew that was what was going to happen when I served you, why did you send me to it?" Have you ever looked at your circumstances and thought, "God, I sought to serve you in my life; why did it have to end up with me facing such hardship?" Maybe you thought to share the gospel with someone, and it spiraled into confusion by others and rejection by many. There are times when I know God had called me to a certain task, but that task was anything but easy and resulted in facing hurts and hardship. Maybe you have faced many hardships and hurt simply because you sought to follow God's will for your life. You served as a faithful employee, a faithful spouse, a faithful mother, or father. But you still faced hardships. How did that feel? And don't think that if the Spirit allowed you to just do some miracles it would remove the hardships! The Holy Spirit gave Paul the gift of healing -and look what that accomplished for Paul!

Paul could have despaired of life and turned on the Spirit saying, "What were you thinking!" But tough circumstances are no time to turn on the one who controls all things and gives us joy. Paul's companions and the disciples of Jesus in Lystra circled around him. I like to think that the newly healed man stood there as well. Paul got right back up, miraculously alive, and he returned right back to the city. The Spirit gives us the gospel. And with it we have a gift even better than healing and far more life changing. It is a message that brings joy in all circumstances. Paul and Barnabas carried on the next day in the nearby town of Derbe and many people believed. Then, remarkably, Paul went back to Lystra where they had attempted to murder him. He went back and traced his steps toward Iconium where they plotted his murder. He went back to Pisidian Antioch where they had expelled him. And he shared the gospel once more in all those places, *"strengthening the believers."* He urged them to continue true to the faith. They would need it! He told them flat out: *"We must go through many hardships to enter the kingdom of God."*

Brothers and sisters. We too must go through many hardships on our way to the kingdom of God. But don't be discouraged or disheartened as you face those many hardships. Instead, remember how God turns sorrow to joy! And don't think some miracle is going to fix it. The only cure is the power of the gospel! It changes lives forever!

Consider how he did that for all of us! There was no language barrier that brought the crowds against Jesus. He spoke plainly, proclaiming himself to be the Son of God coming down to live as a man. But the people failed to do what even the pagans in Lystra first did for Paul. They failed to welcome him and instead sought to kill him. They did more than pelt him to death with stones. They had him bound, nailed, and securely watched by Roman soldiers as he hung on the cross. They didn't drag him outside the city leaving him for dead. They stood and watched him die an excruciating death outside the city until he breathed his last. He was left for dead, and his lifeless body was placed in the tomb. The one who *"made the heaven, the earth, the sea, and everything in them"* was placed in the grave!

The disciples could have said, "Lord, what were you thinking?" Some were near despair and questioned all the suffering. But with our God, joy marches victorious over circumstance. When the women came to anoint Jesus' dead body on the third day, he was no longer dead, but alive. Those women were the first to learn that all who have faith in Jesus find joy in all circumstances. Jesus is the living God! By his death we have the victory over sin, over its curse, and even over the grave! Through faith we know we will live forever in his kingdom. This is good news for all who suffer under sin! We will go through many hardships. But because of Christ we are going through them all towards paradise!

That paraplegic had a problem. He was unable to take a single step. And I'm not talking about the steps so many of us take for granted each day. I mean he was in the darkness of sin and unbelief. He couldn't take one valid step towards eternal life. That all changed when Paul gave him the gospel. He listened to Paul who was preaching the good news. The Spirit worked faith in him through the power of the gospel.

The same is true for you today. The same is true for all who hear and believe the good news! Circumstance can't change the fact that Jesus lives. Circumstance can't change the fact that you have entered into the kingdom of God through faith. Circumstance can't alter the truth that as sure as Jesus rose from the grave you will too. Circumstance can rob you of your joy in the gospel.

What circumstance threatens to rob you of joy? Listen along with all the saints to the good news from the living God who makes joy victorious over circumstance. The striking thing about that paraplegic wasn't that God used Paul to heal him and make him walk. No, the striking truth is that even before Paul healed him, he heard the gospel and had faith in Jesus. He had joy in his new circumstance in Jesus even before being healed! And we know that all who have faith in Jesus have a joy to overcome their circumstance, whatever it might be. Jesus lives! Joy marches victorious over circumstance.