

People of Hope

Foundations of the New Normal, September 5-6, 2020 | Acts 14:8-20

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WHAT DO YOU DO WITH THE HOPE THAT'S INSIDE OF YOU?

We all have hope.

Hope for most people is little more than a wish that something will be or happen.

But as followers of Jesus, our hope is based on God's faithfulness.

God promises us the future, and he is faithfully building and providing the future.

Hope, then, is the confident expectation that God is going to do what he has promised.

Those of us who follow Jesus are naturally filled with hope.

What do you do with the hope that's inside of you?

Do you draw on it? Does it fuel your life day in and day out?

Do you use it up? There may be times when your hope starts to run out.

Do you bottle it up? Maybe you're worried that you're going to run out of hope, so you keep it to yourself and use as little of it as possible so that you don't use it up.

Do you press it down? None of us wants to be disappointed or ridiculed.

What do you do with the hope that's inside of you?

The ancient Greeks told a story about a time when the gods visited earth looking for faith and hope turned into action. The ancient story was written down by the Roman poet, Ovid, around 6 BC.

Zeus and Hermes visited a town nestled deep in a valley in the region of Phrygia in Asia Minor.

They had heard that the wicked town did not welcome strangers and make room for them.

So Zeus and Hermes disguised themselves as travelers and came to the town on the night of a terrible storm. They rushed from house to house seeking shelter and food.

They were turned away repeatedly and were cursed at.

Finally, they started climbing the hill out of the valley when they came to one last house.

Exhausted and soaked, they approached Baucis, the old woman who stood outside.

She hobbled over to them and drew them inside.

Baucis and her husband, Philemon, had no children and very little money.

Their prized possession was a goose who guarded their home.

Once inside, Baucis and Philemon pulled together a meager meal for their guests.

Baucis served wine with the meal. She poured small portions for each of them from their last bottle.

But over the course of the night, she recognized that while she kept pouring from the bottle, the bottle was always full. It was then that she realized she was in the presence of gods.

Ashamed of the meager meal they had provided to the gods, Baucis sent Philemon outside to kill their prized goose to prepare for their guests.

But the goose knew what was happening and ran honking loudly from Philemon.

Zeus and Hermes heard the racket and knew they had been recognized.

They stopped Philemon and asked the couple to follow them farther up the hill.

As they reached the top of the hill, they looked back and saw that the town below had been flooded in the storm. Its residents had died, and they alone had survived.

The story continues with rich rewards for Baucis and Philemon, but we have the essence.

Faith and hope are meant to turn into action. Even ancient pagans recognized this fact.

The Bible tells us that our hope can't be contained.

Hope grows, multiplies, and becomes stronger by being given away.

It fuels our lives and must turn into action.

So how's your hope level today? These days hope is sometimes in short supply.

We're going to dig into the life of the Apostle Paul and see that life threatened to crush his hope. But then we'll see how he responded and learn how hope can grow and multiply.

LYSTRA THREATENED TO CRUSH PAUL'S HOPE.

In Acts 14:8-10, we find Paul arriving in Lystra with Barnabas on his first mission trip.

We commonly call this the first missionary trip or voyage of Paul. However, it started out as a trip led by Barnabas. They went to Cyprus, Barnabas' homeland. By the time they made their way from Cyprus to the coast of Asia Minor, though, Paul became the leading voice.

From the coast of Asia Minor, they made their way up toward the central highlands. First they came to the city of Pisidian Antioch, then to Iconium. In both places, they were able to work for a while, but eventually they were driven out of town by threats of violence.

Then they made their way to Lystra. Lystra was likely founded during the reign of Caesar Augustus. It was located along the southern edge of a system of roads built by Augustus called the Via Sebaste. The Via Sebaste was a major east-west trade route through the southern part of the central highlands in Asia Minor.

There was a range of mountains farther to the south of the Via Sebaste, and the Romans weren't able to control the population there. Frequently people from the mountains would come down and raid merchants and travelers on the Via Sebaste. So Lystra became the first line of defense against the wild mountain people to the south.

The Romans populated Lystra with retired military people who were capable of defending it. Consequently, Lystra was kind of a rough place. The people who lived there tended to be fiercely loyal to Rome and very concrete in their approach to matters of faith. They had no patience for anything that felt like heresy or treason. So let's see how things went:

Now at Lystra there was a man sitting who could not use his feet. He was crippled from birth and had never walked. He listened to Paul speaking. And Paul, looking intently at him and seeing that he had faith to be made well, said in a loud voice, "Stand upright on your feet." And he sprang up and began walking.

This is the perfect way for Paul and Barnabas to meet the people of Lystra and make the Good News about Jesus concrete.

It started with a man who was crippled from birth. The fact that the man was crippled from birth meant that if he were healed, there could be no mistaking what happened. A man crippled from birth walking could only be explained by a miracle.

While Paul was speaking to the crowd, he saw that this man was crippled but recognized that he had some kind of growing faith already. So Paul made a bold statement in a loud voice, "Stand upright on your feet." And then the miracle happened. The man stood up quickly. He sprang up on his feet which had never supported him before. Then he started walking around on his own without help. There was no denying that a miracle had happened.

God demonstrated his power in this incident. That kind of power demonstration spoke loudly to the people of Lystra. It said that whoever these men were, they were in touch with divine power that no one in town could match. So how would they respond?

In Acts 14:11-13, we find the crowds responding to the miracle they had just seen with worship!

And when the crowds saw what Paul had done, they lifted up their voices, saying in Lycaonian, "The gods have come down to us in the likeness of men!" Barnabas they called Zeus, and Paul, Hermes, because he was the chief speaker. And the priest of Zeus, whose temple was at the entrance to the city, brought oxen and garlands to the gates and wanted to offer sacrifice with the crowds.

First of all, we find here that these are the ordinary people in town. They weren't the Greek-speaking merchants. Nor were they the Latin-speaking military leaders. These were the people who came from the area, peasants whose roots went back before the Romans came.

They responded in their own language and proclaimed that gods had clearly come to visit. They remembered the old story Ovid wrote down about Zeus and Hermes coming to visit earth to look for faith and hope turning to action. They knew it, because it was set nearby. These were the people who had a memory of flood and who credited it to missing an appearance of the gods. For a long time, they had vowed that they would never miss Zeus and Hermes again. So this was their chance to set things right! The priest of Zeus brought an offering, and the people started a worship service. The gods had visited them!

Paul and Barnabas rushed to correct them and calm the crowd in Acts 14:14-18.

But when the apostles Barnabas and Paul heard of it, they tore their garments and rushed out into the crowd, crying out, "Men, why are you doing these things? We also are men, of like nature with you, and we bring you good news, that you should turn from these vain things to a living God, who made the heaven and the earth and the sea and all that is in them. In past generations he allowed all the nations to walk in their own ways. Yet he did not leave himself without witness, for he did good by giving you rains from heaven and fruitful seasons, satisfying your hearts with food and gladness." Even with these words they scarcely restrained the people from offering sacrifice to them.

Barnabas and Paul tore their garments, because they were grieving how the people misunderstood them, and they were repenting of the misunderstanding.

They shouted that they were only men who served the living God! They directly contrasted the one, true God with those Greek gods. They claimed that the one, true God is God of it all—heaven, earth,

sea, and all that's in them. That's nothing like the Greeks who thought that each of these forces had its own god.

Then Paul and Barnabas added that the one, true God had allowed them to follow after their own national gods for a period of time. But that time had come to an end.

And they reminded the people that God had been calling out to them all along. God had been providing sun, rain, harvests, food, and joy to draw the people of the earth to himself all along. And now he had sent messengers to fill in the missing details. Now was the time to respond.

However, in Acts 14:19, opponents arrived and stirred up the crowd leading to disaster.

But Jews came from Antioch and Iconium, and having persuaded the crowds, they stoned Paul and dragged him out of the city, supposing that he was dead.

The past caught up with Paul and Barnabas. The enemies they had made in Pisidian Antioch and Iconium followed them to Lystra.

The crowds were confused, because the men who had worked miracles were telling them new and strange things about the gods.

The Jews from Antioch and Iconium filled in the details for the crowds. The confusing things Paul and Barnabas were saying were nothing short of blasphemy and treason. And the citizens of Lystra knew how to deal with blasphemy and treason. Together, the now-larger crowd stoned the spokesman, Paul. Then they dragged him outside of town and left him for dead.

We recognize that feeling that our hope is being crushed.

Of course, we rarely experience opposition to the degree Paul did. Not many of us have been lynched by a mob because of our faith in Christ.

However, we have felt like our hope is being crushed by opposition and circumstances.

We have been in discussions where we were ridiculed for following Jesus.

We have been shouted down at times by people who think that we're crazy cult followers.

We have heard our beliefs talked about like we're disloyal radicals trying to undermine society.

And we've felt life buffeting us, beating the hope right out of us.

Can you imagine being Paul, crouched on the ground as stones rained down on him?

And do you ever feel like that?

PAUL'S HOPE COULDN'T BE CONTAINED.

But then in Acts 14:20, the most extraordinary thing happened.

But when the disciples gathered about him, he rose up and entered the city, and on the next day he went on with Barnabas to Derbe.

Did you notice that there were disciples to gather around Paul? Where did they come from? Paul and Barnabas were the first Christian missionaries to visit Lystra. Which means that some people became followers of Jesus that day, and here they are, standing beside Paul when their neighbors had stoned him!

Then I notice that Paul "rose up." What happened here? It's not clear at all. Were the crowds wrong about Paul's being dead? Did he pretend to be dead? Did he pass out and then wake up? I don't know. What I do know is that the word in the original Greek that we translate "rose up" is almost

identical to the word that we translate “resurrect.” I’m not suggesting that God raised Paul from the dead, but I am suggesting that Paul’s “rising up” is miraculous!

But what happened next is even more miraculous. Paul got up and went right back into Lystra! Can you imagine what that moment must have been like?

Paul—broken and bloodied by being stoned—walked or limped (the text doesn’t say) past the priest of Zeus, standing at the gate cleaning up the failed worship service, through the main gate to the city that he had just been dragged out of, down the main road, past the people who had just stoned him, to a place where he stayed for the night.

Can you imagine what that must have been like? Can you imagine looking the people who just stoned you in the eye as you walk past them? Why would Paul have done that?

It’s because that’s what hope looks like. Hope is knowing that God is promising and preparing the future and pointing us toward it. Paul knew that God’s plan was more powerful than the plans those villagers had. And Paul knew that they desperately needed Jesus. So he went back to town right after they threw stones at him to kill him.

The next day Paul and Barnabas left town and continued on to Derbe.

However, Paul also came back to Lystra at least twice.

I find that fact almost as extraordinary Paul walking back into town after being stoned.

Paul came back to the town where people had tried to stone him.

He came back for the first time shortly after he had left. On the return leg of his first missionary journey, he checked on the new disciples and found that they were thriving. They were ready to have elders appointed over them, so that they could continue to grow.

Then, on a subsequent journey, Paul returned to Lystra to work. It was on the return trip that he ended up asking Timothy to join him. Timothy, Paul’s longtime companion in ministry, was a Christ-follower from Lystra.

Lystra became a thriving center of Christianity for centuries, and it started, because Paul’s hope couldn’t be contained.

CHRISTIAN HOPE CAN’T BE CONTAINED.

Christian hope can’t be contained, because it’s based on Resurrection.

Resurrection is the engine that drives our hope.

When Jesus died, it looked like evil had won. Hope had been snuffed out. The Lord of Life lay in the grave in the clutches of death.

And let’s be honest. Hope is part of our lives, because sin, death, and evil are part of our lives. We need to be reminded of God’s promises for the future and that his promises are certain, because the days in which we live can be difficult and dark.

But the Resurrection reminds us that difficulty, darkness, and evil never win. God raised Jesus from the dead. He defeated sin, death, and evil. And now we know that sin, death, and evil will never win!

That’s why Resurrection is the engine that drives our hope.

Christian hope can’t be contained, because it ends in Revelation.

God will make all things new, creation itself will experience Resurrection.

The Bible paints a picture of the future with artistic touches.

There will be no more mourning or suffering or crying or pain. Evil will be eliminated. The effects of the Fall will be wiped away.

We will be resurrected ourselves and live in glorified bodies forever.

God himself will be at the center of all things.

That's where history is going.

Christian hope can't be contained, because we've got Jesus and eternal life.

Jesus, the Son of God, the King of Kings and Lord of Lords wins! We're with him!

And we've got the promise from God that we will live with him forever!

These promises drive us as followers of Jesus, and they cannot be contained or restrained.

They well up inside of us. They cause us to serve when we want to stop. They cause us to speak when we want to be silent. They cause us to stand when we stumble. They get us up off the ground when we've been knocked down. They cause us to walk right back into the fight when we want to quit. That's the hope that's inside of us. That's the hope that's inside of you. Now...

GO DO SOMETHING WITH IT.

What could you do with the hope that's inside of you?

For just a moment today, picture the Apostle Paul rising up off the ground outside Lystra.

Picture him walking through the gates of the city, looking at people who wanted him dead.

Paul could see the Gospel taking root in Lystra for 1,000 years, and that's what motivated him to rise up and walk back into town.

What will cause you to rise up with steely determination and plunge into the fray?

When you can answer that question, then you will know what God is calling you to do and say with the hope he has placed inside of you.

What will you do with the hope you have to share?

Amazing things happen when a motivated person is presented with a challenge.

Potato chips were popularized in Saratoga, NY, in the mid 1800s.

The story says that a man went into a restaurant there and ordered French-fried potatoes.

The French fries came out too thick and too soggy, so the customer sent them back.

The cook cut the next batch of fries thinner and fried them longer, but the customer still said they were too thick and too soggy.

In exasperation, the cook shaved the potatoes as thinly as possible and fried them until they were golden and crisp, and then served them with salt, and sent them out to the customer.

Expecting the customer to be insulted, the cook was surprised to find that the customer loved them.

And the potato chip was born. Along with a \$7 billion-a-year industry today.

[Reality may have been a little more complicated, but you get the idea.]

When we're pressed, we can be incredibly innovative. We can cause amazing things to happen.

I don't dare tell you what exactly to do with the hope that God has given to you.

It's partly humility that keeps me from telling you exactly what to do with the hope that God has given you. I don't know exactly what God wants you to do with the hope inside of us.

But it's also that I don't want to limit you. If I try to tell you what to do with that hope, I will challenge you to do something that's far too small and far short of what God has planned.

You are infinitely more creative when you put your minds to it.

And that's what I challenge you to do today. Go do something bold and big with the hope that God has placed inside of you!