

Highs and Lows on Mission
Kenwood Baptist Church
Summer Sermon Series: **Join His Mission**
Pastor David Palmer
June 30, 2019

TEXT: Acts 14:8-28



As we continue this morning in worship and listening to God's Word, we move forward to complete the ending of the first missionary journey. In this journey, we see *Highs and Lows in Ministry*. Last Sunday, we had the chance to hear the Word preached through Kurt, our pastoral resident, and he challenged us to see that as we go out in mission, we need to know what to expect. Sometimes there is rejection or hostility, and yet we are to never give up. In this passage this morning, we have a pairing of the joys and sorrows of unexpected highs and unexpected lows. I want us to look at this text carefully, because this passage sets before us mission highs and lows. Oftentimes those things occur side-by-side. Sometimes in ministry you can be at a celebration of the birth of a child, the announcement of an engagement, the joy over a new job or a family member who just received Christ, and you can turn around and the next moment go to someone who has just been diagnosed with a terminal illness. You can be in places of great joy and celebration and turn around and step into times of great sorrow. Yet, both of these things are held together in Christ. They are both part of the mission. So, I want us to look at this text which gives us a moment of joy. What do you do when things go extremely well, and then, what do you do when things don't? This passage has much to teach us, so let's jump right into it.

In Acts 14:8, Paul and his missionary team have continued from the city of Antioch. That is not the Antioch that is their sending church of the East. That's Antioch on the Orontes River. This is

one of the other 18 Antiochs of the first century, that Seleucus built. If you are going to found the city and name it after your father, you call it *Antioch*. If you build a lot of cities, you call them all *Antioch*. This one is distinguished by that adjective, *Pisidian Antioch*. They journeyed from there to Iconium along what was called the *Via Sebaste*, or the *Way of Augustus*. *Sebaste* is the Greek translation of *Augustus* in Latin, the honorific title that was given to Caesar. He built a road, a new road that is still there. I wonder if I-71 will be there in 2000 years, without any updating. It might not be there in 20 years! But, the *Via Sebaste* is there after 2000 years. You can still walk on it. It was a ring road—a little like I-275—that linked all of these Roman colonies: Iconium, Lystra, and several others. The cities in this ring road were comprised of settlers that were often military veterans, and it's interesting that many of the Latin inscriptions in these cities have misspellings in them—no offense to the soldiers, but they probably were not sent out as literary men. Many of the inscriptions have errors, but these cities also have indigenous people from the region who are living there. It's a mixed colony of Roman military veterans and local people.

They reach the city of Lystra, one of these other colonies, and there is a man there who had never walked in his life. He was crippled from birth; he had never walked. As Paul was speaking and announcing the Good News of Jesus Christ, this man was riveted to the preaching of the gospel. There is something so beautiful in Acts 14:9. As Paul was speaking, the text tells us:

“He listened to Paul speaking. And Paul, looking intently at him and seeing that he had faith to be made well, . . .”

Jesus allowed Paul to see inside this man's heart, just like in the gospel narratives when Jesus is speaking to the rich young ruler, and the text tells us that Jesus saw inside of him and loved him. You know, when you're speaking to a group, you're also looking, and you're seeing. I can tell by looking at you that some of you are paying close attention. Others are thinking: “Did I leave the iron on? What will I do with my lunch reservations?” I'm not judging you for that, but I'm just saying, I can see those things. So, focus on the Scripture. This man is focused on the Word, and Paul sees within him great faith, and the ESV obscures this a little bit by saying: “*He had faith to be made well.*” Actually, the text says that he “*had faith to be saved.*” As he was hearing the gospel, this man believed, and so Paul spoke in a loud voice in Acts 14:10: “*Stand upright on your feet.*” This was just like the paralytic who was healed, whose healing demonstrated the veracity of the gospel announcement. This man stood up. He sprang up, literally, and began walking for the first time in his life. Jesus Christ brings healing to us. For some of us, this is the first time in our life we have ever seen or heard or understood. For some of us, for the first time in our life, when the gospel comes in, we know that we were made in the image and likeness of God. We had never known that. We never knew who we were, that we were sons and daughters of the King. This man understood and believed. This is a good beginning. This is a life changed.

When the crowd saw what Paul had done, they lifted up their voices, speaking in Lycaonian. This is one of those small details that would be included from someone who either was there or talked to someone who was there. These weren't the Roman military veterans shouting out; these were the local people from the region. Luke had not yet joined the mission. He joined in two chapters later, but this kind of detail reminds us that the Word of God is based on eyewitness testimony. Luke tells us that he talked to people who were there, and they made a distinction to say the crowds were shouting out in Lycaonian. There are very few Lycaonian speakers alive today. Lycaonian is an Anatolian dialectic, a descendant of Hittite. It's from the local area, in modern-day Turkey. When they saw this, they shouted out in a loud voice, in Acts 14:10:

"The gods have come down to us in the likeness of men!"

Extraordinary! This seems like a great response to ministry. People are excited; crowds are shouting out; attention is gathered. They even identify the gods. Barnabas they called Zeus. He was probably older, more stately in appearance, and Paul they called Hermes, because he was the chief speaker. Last summer, in a profound moment for me in the Antalya Archeology Museum, I found myself standing in between statues of Zeus and of Hermes. The one on the right is Zeus and on the left is Hermes. The people were celebrating. Some scholars think that the local people are reflecting a scene from Ovid's moralizing fable about a time when Zeus and Hermes came to this region in mythology. They came disguised



as ordinary peasants and begin asking the people the town for a place to stay. Sometimes people can be inhospitable. So, Zeus and Hermes come, and no one gives them hospitality except for an elderly couple, Baucis and Philemon. This is not the Philemon of the New Testament, but this elderly couple hosts them. They serve food, and as they are eating and drinking, in the myth, the wine is not running out. So, all of a sudden, Philemon realizes these are not ordinary men: "These are gods at my house." They apologized for the poverty of the meal, and Zeus kindly says: "That's okay. Why don't you come with us up to the hilltop." They climb up to this hilltop, Zeus and Hermes together with Baucis and Philemon, and Zeus says: "Now look back at the city." They look back, and Zeus says: "I'm going to wipe that city out because they didn't show me hospitality." And that's what happens. That's the myth.

Whether the local people are thinking of this or not, they see something incredible, unusual, extraordinary—a man would have never walked is healed—and so the people do what people do, as we are made to worship. They begin to assemble for worship. The priest of Zeus, whose temple is outside the city, brings oxen and garlands to the gates and prepares to offer sacrifice.

The offering of bulls draped with garlands is the feature of Roman era religion. There are many



examples of this in processional ways. You see people bringing oxen draped with garlands. You see oxen that are offered depicted with garlands draped to their side. The religious epicenter of the Roman world, the Altar of Peace, is decorated on the inside with variations of ox skulls and

garlands. So, they're doing what they do. This is the thing to do, and they're speaking in



Lycaonian. Paul is a Hebrew speaker. He's a Greek speaker. He is not understanding what they're saying, but he recognizes: "Here come the oxen and garlands." Remember that 60% of communication is nonverbal, so

when people are rushing at you with oxen and garlands, even if you don't understand the local language, you surmise they are about to offer sacrifice! What do you do when the Lord works through you in a powerful way and people are tempted to worship you? That's the challenge of this passage when God works through us and people direct their praise to us: "You are just so amazing. I wish I could be like you!" This happens. If people are worshiping you or me, they're not worshiping God. It's that simple. In that desire to worship that's in us, we start to pour it out on the person. But, don't you love it when a great athlete or someone who's being honored publicly deflects that praise and says: "I just want to thank God for the opportunity to be here. I want to thank my parents or teachers." They redirect all that praise away from self.

What did the apostles do? The first thing they do is to tear their garments. When someone is giving you praise that rightly belongs to God, that should strike you with grief. They rush into the crowd. I love that. They don't stay back. They tear their garments; they rush into the crowd; and they cry out in Acts 14:15:

"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.”

The text says: “We are men with similar passions as you.” What the ESV translates as “of like nature,” the text says: “We’re people with the same desires, emotions. We’re just like you, and we bring you good news to turn away from these vain things to a living God.” We are all worshiping, but some of us are worshiping the living God and some of us are worshiping things that are lifeless, life-taking, or vain. Paul introduces the living God to them as the God who made the heaven and the earth and the sea and all that is in them. Where would you know that? You would know that from reading Genesis. Paul’s language here is a quotation of Exodus 20:11 and Psalm 146 celebrating God as our Creator. God is not only our Creator, he says, but he is also a God who is seeking the nations. He did not leave Himself without a witness.

People today who don’t believe in God, or who believe in other gods than the living God, have to work hard to suppress the ever-flowing stream of data. The Scriptures say that God is communicating to us day after day, 24-7, with His works of creation. When you take a breath, it should remind you that God is out there. When you see the orderliness of the heavens, God’s creative design is on display. Paul could have talked about the complexity of the human person, and yet the first thing he chooses to remind us of the witness that God has put out there for us to see and to know that He is there, the first evidence is the rain. Is that what comes to your mind? That’s honestly not the first thing that I tend to think of if I want to try to evangelize someone who says: “I don’t believe in God,” but Paul says in Acts 14:17:

“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.”

Maybe you haven’t noticed around here, but it rains. I mean, it rains quite a bit! Have you really thought about the rain or just complained about it? John Piper helped me to appreciate the miracle of rain in his devotional, “Taste and See.”

Rain is really an extraordinary thing. Imagine yourself as a farmer far from any lake or stream. As a farmer in antiquity, a few wells keep your family and animals well-supplied with water, but if the crops are to grow, and your family is to be fed, then water has to come from another source on the fields. Imagine you are following up with Paul on this topic. Where does the water come from? It comes from the sky. The sky? Yes, water will come out of the clear blue sky. Well, not exactly. Water will have to be carried in the sky from the Mediterranean Sea over several hundred miles and then be poured out on the fields from the sky. Carried? How much does it weigh? Well, if one inch of rain falls on one square mile of farmland during the night, that would be 2,323,000 ft.³ of water, which is 17,000,000 gallons, which is 144,000,000 pounds of water. That’s heavy. So, how does it get up in the sky and stay there if it is so heavy? Well, it gets up there by evaporation. Really? That’s a nice word. What does it mean? It means the water stops being water for a while so it can go up and not down. Okay. I see. So then, how

does it get down? Well, condensation happens. What's that? Condensation is when the water starts becoming water again by gathering around dust particles about one millionth of a centimeter wide. That's small. What about the salt? The Mediterranean Sea is saltwater, and that would kill the crops. Well, the salt has to be taken out. So the sky—get a hold of this—picks up millions of pounds of water from the sea, takes out the salt, carries the water hundreds of miles, and then dumps it on the farm. Well, it doesn't actually dump it. If it dumped it, then the wheat would be crushed. So, the sky dribbles the millions of pounds of water in little drops. They have to be big enough to fall for one mile without evaporating, and small enough to keep from crushing the wheat. How do these microscopic specks of water that weigh millions of pounds get heavy enough to fall? Well, it's called coalescence, or you can just stop and thank God for the rain.

Brothers and sisters, the rain is powerful evidence of God as our Creator. You should never feel a drop of it on your hand, your face, or your field, without giving thanks. God gives the rain, and He satisfies us with food that grows. God gives us fruitful seasons, and this is the living God! This is the God who is powerful enough to do this every day. With these words, Luke tells us in Acts 14:18:

“Even with these words they scarcely restrained the people from offering sacrifice to them.”

They just barely restrained them. Can you imagine the evening debrief from that day on mission? “Praise God, that the man would had never walked, walked! And then praise God that we were able to restrain the people from giving us the credit!” God forgive us if we ever take the credit. It must of been a good conversation that evening.

Ministry mission highs are sometimes adjacent to ministry lows. The transition from Acts 14:18 to the next verse is quite abrupt. From the high and the celebration of the healing and getting a chance to redirect people away from idolatry to the living God is juxtaposed in Acts 14:19 as:

“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.”

Stoning is a religious execution. Sometimes, for those of us who read the short story, “The Lottery,” or have the disadvantage of ever seeing the short film—which I'm still trying to get out of my mind from high school—imagine stoning as an out-of-control mob scene where everyone is throwing rocks. It's really not the picture in the New Testament world. The Mishnah describes the process of stoning, which, in Leviticus 24, is a religious execution in Scripture for blasphemy. Romans don't stone people. In Israel, you are stoned for blasphemy. It is a painful, agonizing conclusion of the community that you are so dishonoring God that you are putting all of our lives in danger. That's the conclusion Paul's kinsmen reach. The method of stoning people that's

described in ancient texts is to take someone up to an elevated area twice the height of a person, and they are pushed off. If they fall on their head and their neck is broken, that's it. Otherwise, a large, single stone is dropped from that height of around 15 or 20 feet, and if that stone doesn't kill you, then another is dropped. It's a sad moment that doesn't happen often, but that's the picture. That's why Jesus in the gospels is being led up to a high place when He was about to be pushed off. Paul's own community concluded that his teaching about Christ was blasphemous, and they stoned him. They considered that the stoning was effective and that he had died, but the course of his mission was not yet complete. As the disciples gathered around him, he rose up. If you look at the geography of this journey, they've gone from Pisidia Antioch to Iconium, Lystra, and Derbe, and the next town over is Tarsus, Paul's hometown. If I had just been stoned and the Lord protected my life, I'd sure think about going home. Instead, he goes back into the city. He goes back into the city alive. They continued on the journey at Christ's direction and preached the gospel in Derbe, and after they had made many disciples, they returned to those cities, even where they had faced great opposition. They returned and they strengthened the disciples, and they encouraged them to be steadfast and continue in the faith. They told them the truth, in Acts 14:22:

“. . . strengthening the souls of the disciples, encouraging them to continue in the faith, and saying that through many tribulations we must enter the kingdom of God.”

They said that entering the kingdom of God means you have to go through some hard things, like stoning. That's why Paul writes at the end of Galatians: “I have on my body the marks of following Jesus.”

Brothers and sisters, whether there's rejection, initial displeasure, open hostility, we serve Christ with patient commitment and determination, because He is worthy. You cannot predict the ending based on initial rejection. Often, it is the case that those who are most opposed initially will become the most deeply committed. They strengthen the disciples; they organize the local church and appoint elders. With fasting and prayer, they commit them to the Lord, and they return to Antioch, the sending church, and we read in Acts 14:27:

“And when they arrived and gathered the church together, they declared all that God had done with them, and how He had opened a door of faith to the [nations].”

It is Jesus Christ who opens the doors, and He opens the doors around us and invites us to walk through them, not with our own message, as we learned last Sunday, but with the message of the Good News of Jesus Christ. We don't have to make up the message. We do have to know the message, though. We have to know the story of Scripture, that God, who is our Creator, has acted to redeem and save us as His creation, and that saving action is in Jesus Christ. We learned last Sunday that we have to know the audience to whom we are speaking, and we have to know what to expect. We can expect ripples and turbulence, but we can also expect with

absolute certainty—and this is what moves me from passive to active—we can expect with absolute certainty that people will respond. We see the ending in Revelation 7, an innumerable multitude of people from every nation believe. We go through an open door knowing that there are people on the other side of that door who are appointed for eternal life, and it is our privilege to extend it to them.

As we join the mission, we will experience great highs and profound lows. When we experience the great highs, it is critical that we direct all the praise and give all the glory to God. When we experience profound lows, we respond with determination, courage, and commitment. Following Jesus Christ, joining His mission, is the greatest thing. It is the greatest thing, and the Lord moves in ways to open doors and new seasons, and you just never know when the Lord is going to do it. The greatest predictor of that movement is a spirit of prayer. When the Lord starts to move us to pray and seek Him and His movement among us, that is a great leading indicator. I'd love to see the prayer room jam packed before Sunday morning. It would be an indicator, not out of guilt, but out of how the Lord is moving your heart to say: "I'm going to get there just a little early, and I am going to pray, starting at 9 o'clock, for God to do great things." You are all invited.

In 1904, the Lord breathed the spirit of prayer in Wales. Our daughter Salome is a student at Gordon College, and her family-away-from-home is Welsh. The grandmother lives with the family, and I've talked with the grandmother. She experienced the Welsh revival. She said there was a great move of the Lord and a whole generation of Christian leaders was raised up in a



one-year period. In a one-year period in Wales, through the leadership of a 26-year-old coal miner, (Isn't that a perfect ministry leader background?) named Evan Roberts. He was used of God. Over 100,000 people in Wales were converted in a year. The alcoholism rate in the city dropped by 50%. Mrs. Walters told me that those conversions were real. I would love to be a part of that. Do you want to see something like that in the United States? I would love to see something like that, and I would love to see it being led by people in their 20s, and I love for the older generations to get behind that, saying: "You go for it. We are praying." Not only was the revival in Wales, but like all revivals, it launched mission. It

was the natural outcome of conversion. This movement spread out to Scotland and England, and scholars estimate that 1 million people were converted in Britain in 12 months. Missionaries went out after this revival. They went to Europe; they came to California; they went to Africa and Asia and India. Some of the missionaries went to the northeast part of India to a region known as Assam. This area had hundreds of tribes, and these tribal peoples in north-

east India were totally unreached. They were aggressive; they were headhunters. Men showed their status by the number of skulls on display in their home. As the missionaries went into this area, they came to the Garo tribe, and as the gospel was preached, a young man named Nokseng believed, together with his wife and his children, and the Welsh revival spread out and touched north-east India. Nokseng proclaimed his faith in Christ, and the people in the village also began to accept the gospel. As the gospel grew, it prompted hostility. The village chief summoned all the villagers. He brought this family who had been the first



converts to Christianity forward and challenged them to renounce their faith publicly or face execution. Moved by the Spirit, Nokseng began to sing: "I have decided to follow Jesus. I have decided to follow Jesus. No turning back, no turning back." Enraged at the refusal of Nokseng, the chief ordered his archers to arrow down his two sons before his eyes. The chief asked him again: "Will you deny your faith? You have lost both of your children. You will lose your wife, too." Nokseng began to sing: "Though none go with me, still I will follow. Though none go with me, still I will follow. No turning back, no turning back." The chief was beside himself with fury and ordered that Nokseng's wife be killed on the spot, and she was. Now he asked, enraged, for the last time: "I will give you one more opportunity to deny your faith and live." Nokseng began to sing again: "The world behind me, the cross before me. The world behind me, the cross before me. The world behind me, the cross before me. No turning back, no turning back," and he was shot dead. As he fell to the ground, the chief who ordered the killings was so moved that he yelled out into the ears of his village: "Why should this man, his wife, and his children die for a Man who lived in a faraway land, 2000 years ago? There must be some power behind this faith." And in his spontaneous confession, this chief shouted out: "I, too, I, too, belong to Jesus Christ!" When the crowds heard the confession from the chief, the whole village placed their faith in Jesus Christ. If you look up the Garo tribe, India, today, you will see that the religion of this tribe is Christianity, and the song "I Have Decided to Follow Jesus" is their song.

So, brothers and sisters: No turning back, no turning back! The God who can move the heart of a 26-year-old coal miner to breathe anew on his country, to flood out in mission to unreached peoples, that's what's going on in the world, and that's what we're called to be part of. When we join His mission, we join in to reality in the most important things happening in this world. Would you stand with me, and let's resolve to follow Jesus together.

Oh, Lord Jesus, we magnify You. We thank You, Lord, for your mission in the world, and we earnestly desire to join it. Lord, help us to join in small or big ways whatever You ask of us, we pray. Help us to decide to follow You, no turning back, no turning back!

In Jesus' Name, Amen.