

“Walking with God in Difficult Times”
(Acts 14:1-22)

I. Introduction.

A. Orientation.

1. Last week, we considered how to walk with God during the good times.
 - a. No time is perfectly good:
 - (i) There is always a fly in the ointment to remind us that this is not heaven – heaven is still ahead of us.
 - (ii) But how to walk with Him during those relatively good times of blessing.
 - b. During these times, there are things we need to watch out for:
 - (i) We must make sure we don't forget the Lord and think that somehow we don't now need Him.
 - (ii) We mustn't forget that He gave us these blessings and guard against giving ourselves the credit for them.
 - (iii) We must guard our hearts against pride, thinking we are somehow better than others because we have these blessings.
 - (iv) And we must resist trusting in the blessings themselves, rather than in the One who gave us these things.
2. To guard ourselves against these particular sins, there is something we must do: we must learn to give thank.
 - a. God made us so that we could receive, understand, and thank Him for His mercies; and so we must always give Him the thanks and the praise so we don't forget.
 - b. But we must do it in a certain way:
 - (i) Through Christ the Mediator.
 - (ii) For all things: good or “bad.”
 - (iii) With more than just words, but also with our whole being.
 - (iv) By giving ourselves to Him in thankful service.
 - (v) For the whole duration of our lives and throughout all eternity.
 - (vi) We can know that we are truly thankful when we thank Him with our lives.

B. Preview. This evening, let's consider the other side of the coin: walking with God during the difficult times (the trials and tribulations).

1. We're more likely to be in these situations than the other.
 - a. This world is not heaven – this is not the time of our reward.
 - b. Jesus tells us, “Each day has enough trouble of its own” (Matt. 6:34) - every day will present its own set of problems.
 - c. He says in John's Gospel, “In the world you have tribulation” (John 16:33), just as Paul tells us in our text, “Through many tribulations we must enter the kingdom of God” (Acts 14:22).

- d. Though these trials/tribulations are ultimately a part of God's plan, He generally brings them from one of two sources: either from the sin in our own hearts, or from the sin the hearts of others (certainly, they also arise from the demonic realm).
 - e. If we don't think we have to deal with very many very often, we may have become so used to them that we don't realize them any longer as trials.
 - (i) Just read your Bible; see what you and those around you are supposed to be and do, and then take a look around you.
 - (ii) Living in this world is a constant trial – as Christians, it's the closest to hell we'll ever get.
2. Some of these trials, or crosses, we must bear will be relatively easy, but others will be more difficult.
- a. With regard to the "easier" trials, we need to make sure not to make them any more difficult than they are:
 - (i) Don't be too discouraged by your own weaknesses.
 - (a) Perfection isn't possible in this world.
 - (b) We will always struggle with at least one besetting sin.
 - (c) We must fight against all our sins and strive to put them to death; but just because they aren't all dead, we shouldn't despair: the Lord will give us victory over them if we persevere.
 - (ii) With regard to the offenses that come from others:
 - (a) Learn to pass over them in love when you can.
 - (b) Keep yourself from directing your anger at the offender; instead be angry at the sin that caused the offense.
 - (c) Pray that the Lord would fill your heart with compassion for those who sin against you, rather than hatred; and pray for them.
 - (d) If you can't cover over their sin in love, then admonish them *in love*, remembering that but for God's grace, you may very well do the same thing.
 - (e) If we adopt Edwards' resolution on this point, we would do well: "Resolved, to act, in all respects, both speaking and doing, as if nobody had been so vile as I, and as if I had committed the same sins, or had the same infirmities or failings as others; and that I will let the knowledge of their failings promote nothing but shame in myself, and prove only an occasion of my confessing my own sins and misery to God" (8).
 - b. The more difficult trials (our more serious sins and the more serious offenses of others) will require special attention, and so we'll spend the balance of our time on these. Let's consider during these harder situations:
 - (i) That we must guard our hearts against sinful anger.
 - (ii) That we must guard against despair.
 - (iii) That we must learn to endure them with patience.
 - (iv) That we must learn to thank God for them.

- (v) Finally, that we must learn the lesson the Lord wants to teach us through them.

II. Sermon.

A. First, we need to guard our hearts against sinful anger.

1. Anger, in and of itself, is not necessarily sinful.
 - a. If it was, then our Savior sinned, which isn't possible.
 - b. When Jesus commanded the man with the withered hand to come forward, and then questioned the Jews if it was lawful to do good on the Sabbath, when no one replied, He looked "around at them with anger, grieved at their hardness of heart" (Mark 3:1-5).
 - c. Not all anger is justified, but some is.

2. How can we know when our anger has crossed the line?
 - a. First, when it's self-centered rather than God-centered:
 - (i) When Cain killed Abel because God had accepted Abel, but not him: that was sinful anger.
 - (ii) When Lamech killed a man and a boy for wounding him, that was sinful anger (Gen. 4:23).
 - (iii) Whenever we become angry because someone has offended us, because we don't have what we want or because someone else has what we want: that too is sinful anger.

 - b. Second, maybe we do have a good reason to be angry – someone has done something dishonoring to God – but if our anger puts out the love in our hearts towards God or our neighbor – if it keeps us from wanting to do our duty towards God by doing the loving thing for our neighbor – then it's sinful.
 - c. When our anger becomes too strong or lasts longer than it should for a particular offense, then it's sinful.
 - d. When it moves us to retaliate or to seek revenge in any way – either through our thoughts, actions or words – then it's sinful anger.
 - e. In short, when our anger tempts us to break, or to want to break, one or more of God's commands, then it's sinful.
 - f. If we measure our anger by this rule, how much of it is righteous? Not very much.

3. What can we do, then, to check our sinful anger?
 - a. First, remember that God hates sinful anger, as He hates all sin.
 - (i) It's one of the fruits of the flesh that we are to put to death (Gal. 5:20).
 - (ii) It will inevitably offend God and injure those we care about.

 - b. If left unchecked, it may even condemn us, "But I say to you that everyone who is angry with his brother shall be guilty before the court; and whoever says to his brother, 'You good-for-nothing,' shall be guilty before the

supreme court; and whoever says, ‘You fool,’ shall be guilty *enough to go into the fiery hell*” (Matt. 5:22).

- c. And so we should remember these things and guard our hearts against sinful anger: Paul writes, “Be angry, and yet do not sin” (Eph. 4:26).
- d. If you can’t fully overcome it, then try and keep yourself from saying or doing things you’ll later regret.
- e. Remember that God is with you: He sees everything you do and knows everything you think (Ps. 11:4-5). If when others are around us it helps to restrain our anger, how much more when we know God is with us?
- f. If you still can’t control it, then leave as peaceably as you can.
- g. Above all, make sure you don’t let your anger grow into bitterness; don’t let the sun go down on it (Eph. 4:26); pray that God would subdue it; remember the example of Christ, that though He was hated and injured far more than we will ever be, He never retaliated (1 Pet. 2:23; Heb. 12:2-3).

B. Second, we must guard our hearts from discouragement and despair.

1. During difficult times we’ll be tempted to think God has abandoned us.
 - a. Grief can tempt us to complain again God – He is sovereign, why is He allowing this?
 - b. It can quench our love to God – why would He put me through this?
 - c. It can close our hearts toward our neighbor – especially if they are the source of our trial – even though we are to love our enemies as well as our friends.
2. To overcome this, we must:
 - a. First, turn our grief for our trials or tribulations away from God or man, and instead grieve over the cause: sin – this is the enemy!
 - b. Second, let your grief drive you to Christ: ask Him to take it away and to give you joy and comfort in its place.
 - c. And look to the promises of God, and know that He will bring us out of our trials:
 - (i) David writes, “Why are you in despair, O my soul? And *why* have you become disturbed within me? Hope in God, for I shall again praise Him *for* the help of His presence” (Ps. 42:5).
 - (ii) And Paul writes, “And we know God causes all things to work together for good to those who love God, to those who are called according to His purpose” (Rom. 8:28).
 - (iii) We must guard against anger and despair.

C. Third, we must learn instead to endure trials with godly patience.

1. What is godly patience?
 - a. Godly patience is when you know that your difficult circumstances are from God, you feel an unwillingness in yourself to bear them, but you do because you want to follow Christ’s example of honoring the God who brought these things into your life for a reason: as Jesus prayed, “My Father, if it is possible, let this cup pass from Me; yet not as I will, but as You will” (Matt.

26:39). Christ was an example to us not only of suffering, but of obedience in His sufferings, even to the point of death (Phil. 2:8).

- b. Scudder writes, “This patience is a grace of the Spirit of God, wrought in the heart and will of man, through believing, and applying the commandments and promises of God to himself; whereby, for conscience sake towards God, 1 Peter 2:19, he does submit his will to God’s will, quietly bearing, without bitterness and vexation, all the labour, changes, and evil occurrences which befall him in the whole course of his life, whether from God immediately, or from man: as also waiting patiently for all such good things as God has promised, but yet are delayed and unfulfilled” (Daily, 141).

2. How can we gain more godly patience through our trials?

- a. We must first, subdue our sin, which is the source of all our impatience: Every time our flesh is denied, we will always become impatient – if we can put our sin to death, we will become far more patient.
- b. We must humble ourselves – when we realize that we don’t deserve even the least of God’s mercies (we all really deserve hell), that even the greatest difficulties we have to face are far less than our sins deserve (Ezra 9:13), then we will be willing to bear them more patiently. Scudder writes, “He who acknowledges that he has deserved to be hanged, drawn, and quartered, for an offence against the king, if the king will be so merciful that he shall escape only with a severe whipping, to remember him of his disloyalty, though he smart terribly with those lashes, yet in his mind he can bear them patiently and submissively” (147).
- c. We must cultivate faith, hope and love in our lives. Faith will give us peace with God and encourage us to hope in His promises; and the stronger we love Him, the less we will be impatient with Him.
- d. Remember too, that God is the One who sent the difficulties.
 - (i) That He has some good purpose behind it:
 - (a) To humble us, to show us our sin, to bring us to repentance, to help us to grow in grace, to try our faith to see if we will rest on His Word, to see if we are ready to receive His promised blessings.
 - (b) Even though the things He brings might be terrible and we can’t see anything good in them with our earthly eyes, we need to look through the eyes of faith and see the good the Lord intends.
 - (ii) That He was motivated by His love for us. God doesn’t afflict us to punish us, but to remove our sins, strengthen our graces, keep us from greater evils, and give us a stronger assurance (Psalm 119:67, 71).
 - (iii) And that He only afflicts as much as we need to bring about the good result: He will never lay more on us than we can endure (1 Cor. 10:13).
 - (iv) When we know an operation is good for us and will save our lives, we’ll submit to it. When we know God’s afflictions are good for us, it’s easier to submit to them.

- e. Remember too that if we choose not to humble ourselves patiently under trial, the trial will last longer.
 - (i) When we discipline our children for something minor, and they fight against us, we don't stop the discipline, but increase it.
 - (ii) In the same way, the Lord won't release us from a trial until we learn His lesson, humble ourselves and submit to Him.

- f. Don't forget as well to encourage yourself by the blessings the Lord has given you.
 - (i) He always gives us far more blessings than crosses to endure.
 - (ii) Most of all, He has given you His Son:
 - (a) If you have Christ, then you have everything that is worth having (Rom. 8:32).
 - (b) He can make all your trials light. Knowing that you will be with Him in the glory He has prepared far outweighs all the difficulties of life (Rom. 8:18). The trials on earth are short; the eternity of glory is long.

- D. Fourth, we must learn to thank God for our trials.
 - 1. We must always remember that they're for our good.
 - 2. When we go to the doctor or the dentist, we not only submit to the pain they inflict on us patiently, but we thank them and even pay them for their service, because they've done us some good.
 - 3. We need to remember that God also intends to do us good through our trials and thank Him.

- E. Finally, we must learn the lessons the Lord wants to teach us through them.
 - 1. Trials and tribulations are sent to discipline us (teach, correct).
 - a. They're meant to help us overcome our sins, so that we might share in the Lord's holiness (Heb. 12:10).
 - b. We need then to learn and grow: this is what God is seeking to bring about.

 - 2. Once we've learned the lesson, the trial will be over, and we will be better for it:
 - a. We'll have a stronger assurance.
 - b. We'll be more useful to your brethren.
 - c. And the Lord will have much more useful servants (Phil. 4:11-12).
 - d. Let's pray that the Lord will help us make better use of our trials that we might grow in grace. Amen.