

# A Door of Faith

Acts 14:1–28

November 18, 2001

On Friday night, Dan Rather mentioned the release of eight prisoners, including two American women, who had been held by the Taliban in Afghanistan for what he called “the crime of preaching Christianity.” But something does not ring true about that. I do not know whether that was the actual charge against them, though perhaps it was. Nor do I know whether Dan Rather made a mistake. But what I do know is that Christian missionaries do not preach Christianity. They preach Jesus Christ. Therein lies all the difference.

I suspect that what happened is that Dan Rather did not want to name the name of Jesus Christ on his national television broadcast, though I do not know that. Whatever the reason for his circumlocution, the effect is clear: by avoiding Jesus Christ and looking only at Christianity, Christianity is presented as one religion among many, with no special claim to the truth, with nothing distinctive, with no good news, with no good hope, and therefore with no reason to propagate itself elsewhere at the expense of other religions. And once you start down that road there is no good conclusion.

I am not saying that God has not used the church to do some good things through the centuries. He has, and we are grateful for that. At the same time, we realize that the church has done some terrible things on its own, too. If we wanted to make a case before the world on the strength of the record of Christianity, we would have lost before we started. But that is not the way we do things. Christianity is not the content of our proclamation. It is the result of our proclamation. The church is not the starting point of our preaching. Building up the church, making disciples, and gathering the faithful, are the goals of preaching. Jesus Christ is the content of our proclamation, the subject of our preaching, the source of our life, the strength of our hope, and the goal of our faith. We preach Jesus Christ, not Christianity! And that is what Paul and Barnabas did, too. They preached Jesus Christ. And when they did that, things happened.

Paul and Barnabas “*so spoke* that a great company believed, both of Jews and of Greeks.” “They remained for a long time, *speaking boldly* for the Lord, who bore witness to *the word of his grace*, granting signs and wonders to be done by their hands.” “They *preached the gospel*. “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.” “They . . . *preached the gospel* to that city and . . . made many disciples.” “They . . . *spoke . . . the word*.” Over and over again, in all these ways, in the face of terrible opposition and with mixed results, Paul and Barnabas preached the gospel of Jesus Christ, spoke the word of God, and brought to the people the good news of the grace of God in Jesus Christ.

What did they say? What good news did they have? What attracted so many people to faith and propelled so many others to anger and attempted murder? They said the same thing the church still has to say today: they preached Jesus Christ. Jesus of Nazareth, born of Mary, is as fully human as any mother’s son. At the same time, Jesus was sent to us from God, and by God, to save us from our sins. Jesus is our Savior. He is the one whom God has anointed for this ministry, so he is the Messiah, or the Christ. Indeed, in order for him to be our Savior, Jesus is also our Lord, and he is the very Son of God, which is to say that Jesus himself is divine.

This did not mean, however, that he was well received. Quite the opposite, Jesus was despised and rejected, wrongly accused of blasphemy against God and sedition against the empire. He was falsely convicted by the world's greatest legal system of the day, with the full approval of the world's truest religion of the time, and he was executed on a cross outside Jerusalem. His enemies unwittingly fulfilled the divine plan. The one man without sin took your sin and mine upon himself on the cross, paying the price of our disobedience so that we might be forgiven. He took on our sin without himself becoming sinful, so that one time, one person made it through this life without sinning against God, and the benefit of that has been expanded to all God's chosen. The one man who had done no evil suffered the onslaught of all evil on the cross, and he still did not do, commit, or become evil. He did not hate those who hated him. He did not curse those who cursed him. He did not wish evil upon those who killed him. Instead, he prayed for his enemies. And at that moment, the power of evil was forever broken.

It would not have been enough for him to have been pushed almost to the edge. In order for this test to prove him true, he had to go all the way. So it is that he died. He died for you and me. He died without hating anyone. He died without sinning. So in his death he conquered sin and evil. And in his death he conquered the fear of death. But what of death itself? He conquered death from the other side. He did not avoid it. He did not escape it. He allowed it to do its worst, and on the cross, its worst was horrible. But with the defeat of fear, sin, and evil, all of death's weapons were destroyed.

And God the Father of Jesus Christ, seeing that Jesus had fulfilled his mission, vindicated his sacrifice and raised him to a new and different life, eternal life, the same person but in a transformed body, forever beyond disease, decay, decline, and death. Even his resurrection was not simply for his own sake. It was, first of all, for the greater glory of God, to show the power of God over all things, even over death. And second, as the death of Christ was for the forgiveness of our sin, so is his new life the promise of our own for all who receive his grace through faith.

This is what they preached: Jesus Christ, crucified and resurrected. This is what we preach today: Jesus Christ, crucified and resurrected. Some complain that they have heard it all before, but the very complaint proves that they have not heard anything before. Those who have heard it before love to hear it over and over again. Some complain that the preaching of Jesus Christ is narrow and exclusive, undermining the worship of other gods and the supreme authority of the state. Some do not want to admit their sin, preferring instead to wallow in it. Some do not want to let go of evil, seeking instead to continue perpetuating it. Some do not want to relinquish their love of death, whether of others or of their own. Some react violently to the preaching of God's suffering love. But some, chosen before the foundations of the world, hear, believe, rejoice, and obey. Are you one of these?

Paul and Barnabas had a hard time. Though many believed, many did not. And those who did not were hateful and violent. Even when God graced their ministry with signs and wonders, the people tried to kill them and thought they had done so. Did this deter Paul and Barnabas? Not at all. If anything, it convinced them that they were on the right path. To the extent that they suffered for the sake of preaching our suffering Lord, they were comforted by sharing that with him, confirmed that they were following him, and encouraged to keep on going. Would that we were so strong today! Near the end of this inland mission tour, Paul summed up their difficulties in this way: "Through many tribulations we must enter the kingdom of God." Of course, life itself is full of tribulations. But he was talking about suffering on behalf of the gospel, on behalf of preaching Jesus Christ, on behalf of believing Jesus Christ. He is not saying that suffering

earns salvation. That would contradict everything he stood for. He was just saying that suffering for the gospel is part and parcel of being Christian in this fallen world. Are we willing to bear that burden and to pay that price today?

Back at the home church in Antioch, when he was making his report on their mission trip, Paul did not dwell on the negatives but on the positives. I cannot read this chapter without almost being overwhelmed by the danger, the hatred, the violence, and the suffering. But Paul was overwhelmed with the positive response of faith. Paul was overwhelmed with the joy and number of new disciples. "A great company believed." "They . . . made many disciples." They started new churches and even elected, ordained, and installed elders (which means they must have been Presbyterian). Paul was building up the church, because that is what the preaching of Jesus Christ does. I hope nobody ever tried to tell Paul that numbers did not matter. He would have taken kindly to such nonsense. Paul spent his life building up the church. Now the church has grown from twelve apostles to a billion people! The people who built this beautiful sanctuary obviously meant for the church to grow. The people who started our radio ministry did so for the overflow crowd, for the people who could not fit into this sanctuary. Why in the world would anybody today think it is okay for us to have a single empty seat in here? Of course, numbers matter! The church exists to grow, not to die. The church exists to spread the gospel, not to hide it.

We do not preach Christianity. We preach Jesus Christ. And when we do that, God graces our efforts with the building up of his church. Paul did not take any credit for what had happened. He knew better than that. Instead, he said that "God had . . . opened a door of faith." God had decided that Jesus Christ was not just Savior of the Jews but Savior of the world. God had decided that the Gentiles would hear the gospel and believe in Jesus Christ. It was not because of Paul. It was not because of the Gentiles. It was all because of God.

Unless somebody here today used to be Jewish, and I do not know about it, we are all beneficiaries of the preaching of Jesus Christ to the Gentiles. A door of faith has been opened to us. Do not neglect it. If you have not made a profession of faith in Jesus Christ, do so today. And if you have made a profession of faith, if you have already heard the gospel, if you have believed in Jesus most of your life, for whom are you holding the door today? No, we do not make the doors. We do not open the doors. God opens the doors to faith, and he continues to do so today. Are we slamming them shut, or are we bringing people through? Kevin and Rebecca Hudson are here today as our newest members because David Holt invited them to church. They could have gone anywhere they wanted to or no where at all, but this door was opened to them. And for that, we thank God.

What doors of faith is God opening today? To whom does God want his son preached today? Who is standing in the need of prayer? Who is kneeling in the need of forgiveness? Who is broken in the need of healing? Who is dying in the need of eternal life? Are there people in your family who need Jesus Christ? Are there members of the church who have fallen into inactivity and need to be invited and brought back? Are there people in your neighborhood who need a Savior, who need a word of grace, who need a word of comfort, who need a word of hope, who are waiting for you to bring them through the open door? If those two women who have now been released can go to Afghanistan to preach Jesus Christ, can we not say a good word for him here in Richmond? Are there people in this city, this state, this country, and around the world who have yet to hear the gospel and who are waiting for us to send missionaries? Is there anything more important in all the world to do with our money than to provide for the preaching

of Jesus Christ? We need more and larger gifts and more and larger pledges than we have ever had before.

Jesus Christ is our crucified and resurrected Lord and Savior. God has opened the doors of faith. Are you ready to come in from the cold? Are you ready to bring in someone else?

*To God be the glory forever and ever! Amen.*

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