Many of us have been to enough weddings that we could probably recite the typical vows word for word. One of the most important vows people make to each other when they get married is that they will love and cherish their spouse for better or worse.

That’s a promise that our society has conveniently ignored. People are almost as quick to get divorced as they are to trade in their car. For some, their car lasts longer than their marriage. I think if we looked into all of those marriages, you would find that the reason most of them broke apart was because they did not fulfill that one promise, to love each other for better or worse. Things got difficult, so they just gave up.

Maybe for better or worse describes your marriage. When things are good they’re great, but when they aren’t it feels like you just can’t handle it. You have to decide whether to buy groceries, or keep the lights on. You don’t know what to do to help your children succeed. You can’t handle one more argument that doesn’t get resolved.

Maybe for better or worse describes your faith as well. Sometimes you’re on top of the world, and feel like you couldn’t be closer to God. But then you have times of darkness. You have times when you don’t feel God’s presence at all. You have a sin that you can’t seem to conquer. You can’t see where God is leading you, or if he’s leading you at all.

Throughout the Bible we see the idea that our relationship with God should be like a marriage. He talks about being a husband to Israel through the covenant and the way Israel was unfaithful to him in Jeremiah and Ezekiel. Throughout the entire book of Hosea, God used Hosea and Gomer as a living example of what Israel had done to him, being unfaithful time and time again.

In the New Testament the church is called the Bride of Christ. We see Jesus use marriage language in John 14 when he talks about leaving to prepare a place for us and then coming back for us, which is exactly what a husband to be would have done for his new bride. And in the book of Revelation we see the incredible picture of the wedding feast of the Lamb, and the new Jerusalem coming down out of heaven adorned as a bride for her husband.

All of that is meant to point to our relationship with Jesus. It shows us how intimately we should be connected with him, how closely we should follow after him. When marriage is done well here on earth, it gives us one of the most complete pictures of what our relationship with Jesus should look like.

When we choose to follow after Christ we make a lifetime commitment, just like we do with our spouses. We commit to following after Jesus no matter what. We make him Lord of our lives and allow him to direct our path from that point forward. When we choose to follow after Jesus, we choose to do so for better or worse. And sometimes it seems like there is a lot of “or worse”.

Last week we looked at how Paul and Barnabas were bold enough to follow after the leading of the Holy Spirit no matter what. Because they did that, they faced opposition from those who didn’t like what they were doing. When we choose to follow Jesus, we will face opposition and struggles as well.

Today we get a little encouragement from Paul and Barnabas who seemed to have a lot of “or worse” moments in their ministry. If you feel like you have had a lot of those moments yourself, or if you’re in one of those moments right now, then you can take your inspiration from these two who never gave up following God’s calling no matter what the circumstances.

When we left Paul and Barnabas, they were facing persecution from the Jews in the city of Antioch in Pisidia. They were jealous because of the Gentiles who were hearing the Gospel message. The Jews ended up creating so much trouble for Paul and Barnabas that they eventually drove them out of Antioch, so they moved on to a city called Iconium.

**Acts 14:1 ESV — 1** Now at Iconium they entered together into the Jewish synagogue and spoke in such a way that a great number of both Jews and Greeks believed.

After the experience they had just had in Antioch, they came to Iconium and did exactly the same thing. They went into the synagogues first, and they preached the Gospel there first. That hadn’t worked out so well in the end when they went to Antioch, but they did it again anyway. Why?

I think what it comes down to is how you measure success. For most of the world, and even most churches, what qualifies as being successful is, as Gary Johnson puts it, nickels and noses. Success in business is measured by the bottom line. Success in churches is often also measured by the bottom line, as well as how many people are sitting in the sanctuary every Sunday.

If Paul and Barnabas hadn’t been successful with this strategy before, what made them do it again? I think they already knew a principle that I had to learn the hard way. I first read it in an article that was written by minister who had watched his ministry crumble no matter what he tried to do. They eventually ended up closing the doors of the church. I read about it at a time when I wondered if the same thing might happen at the church where I was serving.

The principle is this: God has called us to be faithful, not to be successful. You will find no Scripture that tells you how many people you need to reach with the Gospel to be counted as a success in God’s eyes. You will find no quota of baptisms per year, no minimum balance for the church budget. What you will find, over and over again, is God calling us to be faithful to him.

You see, the success of what we do as a church depends upon what happens in the hearts of the people we try to reach with the Gospel. Try as you might, no person has the ability to change hearts, only God can do that. The success of our work as a church depends upon the work that God does in the hearts of men and women who hear his call, and whether those people respond to it. That’s it. We can’t change that, we can’t control it, and we can’t speed it up.

What we can do, and what we must do, is be faithful to take the message of the Gospel to those who need it. To be faithful to continue praying for people to know Jesus, even when it seems like nothing is happening. We have to take the Gospel to the world, introduce them to Jesus, because they won’t hear it if we don’t. But then we have to have the faith to leave the results in the hands of God.

As much as we want to be in control, we aren’t, and we can’t be. That’s what it means to let Jesus be Lord, to let him be in control, and just be faithful to him.

Paul and Barnabas were doing the same thing in Iconium. They had made some enemies in Antioch, who, as it turns out, weren’t done with them yet. But they were faithful to continue preaching the message of the Gospel to both Jews and Gentiles as they traveled.

Because Paul and Barnabas were bold enough and faithful enough to continue doing what God had called them to do, great numbers of both Jews and Gentiles believed in Jesus. Paul and Barnabas were making new disciples of Jesus in every city they went to because they were bold and faithful.

But again, there were Jews who hated what was happening and did everything they could to cause trouble for Paul and Barnabas. **Acts 14:2 ESV — 2** But the unbelieving Jews stirred up the Gentiles and poisoned their minds against the brothers.

They had ticked off the Jews once again, and they were starting to turn people against them. You might think it was about time they left town again. Start again in a new city, and maybe the people there would be more receptive. But Paul and Barnabas weren’t done yet.

**Acts 14:3 ESV — 3** So 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.

Paul and Barnabas didn’t run away when things got tough. They dug in their heels, and continued to be faithful where God had called them to be.

Something you have probably heard Rod say before is what you win people with, is what you win people to. Paul and Barnabas were enabled by God to do signs and wonders. They were able to heal people, and do other things that amazed the people that saw them. But that wasn’t their main purpose. That was just kind of a side note to what they were really there to do.

Luke lets us know what it was that really impacted the lives of the people in Iconium. It was not just the signs and wonders God enabled Paul and Barnabas to do. It was the faithful, steady, bold preaching of the Word of God. That is what Paul and Barnabas won those people with, and it’s what they won them to.

**Acts 14:4–7 ESV — 4** But the people of the city were divided; some sided with the Jews and some with the apostles. **5** When an attempt was made by both Gentiles and Jews, with their rulers, to mistreat them and to stone them, **6** they learned of it and fled to Lystra and Derbe, cities of Lycaonia, and to the surrounding country, **7** and there they continued to preach the gospel.

When Paul and Barnabas got to Lystra, there was a crippled man there who believed what Paul was teaching. Paul told him to stand up, and he did. Another miracle that God enabled Paul to do because of his faith, and the faith of the man he healed.

**Acts 14:11–13 ESV — 11** 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!” **12** Barnabas they called Zeus, and Paul, Hermes, because he was the chief speaker. **13** And the priest of Zeus … wanted to offer sacrifice with the crowds.

These were men and women who had grown up in a pantheistic culture, which means they believed in many gods. We have all probably studied Greek and Roman mythology in school. What we rightly call mythology, they believed to be true gods. When they saw Paul heal this man, they thought the gods had come down to walk among them. Well he did, but it wasn’t Paul and Barnabas.

These men wanted to offer sacrifices in honor of Paul and Barnabas. They wanted to worship them as gods. **Acts 14:14–15 ESV — 14** But when the apostles Barnabas and Paul heard of it, they tore their garments and rushed out into the crowd, crying out, **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.

Luke tells us that even that barely restrained them from worshiping them and offering sacrifices to them. These people were on board with Paul and Barnabas all the way. I have to think that Paul and Barnabas must have been on top of the world, with people who were glad to hear the Gospel, and who believed their message. This definitely seemed like a “for better” time in their ministry.

But the “for worse” was just around the corner. **Acts 14:19 ESV — 19** 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.

These Jews were not just upset that Paul was in their town stirring people up. They were upset that he was teaching about this Jesus guy anywhere at all. So they followed Paul and Barnabas to Lystra. Iconium was 90 miles away from Antioch in Pisidia. Lystra was another 18 miles from there, and remember, they didn’t have any vehicles to travel. The Jews from Antioch walked over 100 miles just to come and attack Paul. They stirred up the crowds and convinced them that Paul needed to die.

Paul had just enjoyed a group of people who were overjoyed that he was there. They were ready to worship him as a god, until he told them who the real God was. Now he was stoned by people who hated him because of the message he was preaching. They hated Paul because he was speaking about Jesus.

Jesus told his disciples in **Matthew 10:22 ESV — 22** and you will be hated by all for my name’s sake. That was true of the twelve when they went out among the people of Israel, that was true of Paul and Barnabas when they began taking the Gospel to the Jews, and that’s still true today. If you truly follow after Jesus and speak to others about the Gospel, there will be those who will hate you for it. Not because you’re mean, or pushy, or rude, but simply because you dared to speak the name of Jesus. Paul was stoned because these people hated him so much, and it was all because of the name of Jesus.

This was not just an execution. Executions are generally quick, and done by one executioner carrying out the official sentence. This was a mob. The Jews stirred the people up until they had worked them into a frenzy. This stoning was anything but quick. It was a slow, painful way to die. There were multiple people throwing stones at him trying to kill him all at once. These people who had just tried to worship him were suddenly trying to kill him, and they thought they had succeeded.

They dragged him out of town, and left him there. They didn’t even have the decency to bury him. These were Jewish people leading the attack against Paul and Barnabas. According to Jewish law, to leave someone unburied was the most humiliating indignity that could be inflicted on a person. There was an obligation in Jewish culture to bury every person who died, regardless of whether they were a criminal, vagrant, or complete stranger. Yet they dragged Paul’s body out of town, and left him there, unburied and uncared for.

But that wasn’t the end of the story for Paul. **Acts 14:20 ESV — 20** 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.

The text doesn’t specifically say they prayed for him when they gathered around him, but I can’t believe that they wouldn’t have been praying all along. Paul rose up and went back into the very town he had just been dragged out of.

When you read that Paul rose up, don’t think of someone jumping up out of bed, ready to face the day. Paul would have been bruised and bloodied from being stoned. He might have had broken bones, broken ribs, internal bleeding, and severe head wounds as well, since the Jews thought he was already dead. He would have been severely injured, lucky to be alive. But look at what he did next.

**Acts 14:21–23 ESV — 21** When they had preached the gospel to that city and had made many disciples, they returned to Lystra and to Iconium and to Antioch, **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. **23** And when they had appointed elders for them in every church, with prayer and fasting they committed them to the Lord in whom they had believed.

Paul went to one more city to preach the Gospel, and many other people became believers there. Then he came back to the very places where the Jews wanted him dead. These are the cities the Jews came from who stirred up the crowds to have him stoned. These are the very people that attacked and tried to kill him. Yet Paul went back there anyway, and he strengthened and encouraged the believers there.

I don’t know about you, but if I’m ever stoned for preaching the Gospel, and I don’t die, I’m pretty sure I’m going to need you all to strengthen and encourage me. But here was Paul, only days after having been assumed dead by his enemies, strengthening and encouraging others.

Paul and Barnabas had obviously made a lasting impact on the people they spoke the Gospel to, because every place they went back to had a thriving church of believers. Paul and Barnabas appointed elders for each church so they would have a solid leadership, and then they moved on.

Lystra, the very place Paul had been attacked and stoned, ended up being a pretty significant place. It was a church that remained faithful, and raised up a new generation of believers. In Acts 16, we’ll see Paul recruit a young man named Timothy to be his apprentice who was from Lystra. The believers Paul left behind were thriving and growing in their faith, even while others in their cities tried to literally kill the message of the Gospel.

Eventually Paul and Barnabas sailed back to Antioch in Syria, where their journey had first begun. **Acts 14:27 ESV — 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 Gentiles.

We really see the selflessness of Paul here. He comes home proclaiming what God had done with them, how they had used them. I think most of us would come home from that experience telling people, “Let me tell you how awful it was” or “Listen to what I survived”. Instead, Paul was only concerned about what God was doing through him, and what God was accomplishing.

Paul and Barnabas certainly seemed to have some “for worse” moments in their ministry. But even with everything they went through, they never gave up. They continued to be faithful to God no matter what.

There are a few things I want you to take home with you from this story of Paul and Barnabas:

First, sometimes people will be divided by the Gospel. Just like the people of Iconium were divided between those who believed, and those who didn’t. The same thing will happen today. There will be those who are overjoyed to hear about the hope of the Gospel. There will also be those who will hate you the moment you speak the name of Jesus. How a person receives the message of the Gospel is all about their heart, and that’s something we cannot change.

Remember this, God is at work, even when it might not seem like it to us. When things seem to be the same as they have always been, when things seem like they are going badly, when the message of the Gospel divides the people we speak to, God is still at work.

Number two, Jesus promised us things would not be easy. He told his disciples people would hate them simply because of his name. He said in **John 16:33 ESV — 33** I have said these things to you, that in me you may have peace. In the world you will have tribulation. But take heart; I have overcome the world.” People will hate us simply because we speak the name of Jesus. While that is neither pleasant nor fair, we have nothing to fear, because our Savior has already won.

And finally, suffering has a place in discipleship. When Paul was first converted, Jesus told Ananias that he would show Paul how much he must suffer for the sake of the name of Jesus. Suffering helps us to grow in ways we wouldn’t otherwise.

In 1984, a company called Space Biospheres Ventures bought some property in Arizona and began building the Biosphere 2 to study space colonization. Today it’s owned by the University of Arizona as a research facility.

They could control the entire environment within the Biosphere, so they made conditions ideal for the growth of the trees they wanted to plant, and they grew very quickly. They were shocked when the trees started to fall over as they grew to full height. Something was missing in their ideal environment.

They found that the missing component was wind. In nature, every tree is subject to wind that puts stress on the trees. So, the trees begin to send their roots deeper, and they develop stress wood that is denser and stronger, able to stand up to the winds. Without any wind, the trees put down shallow roots, and the trees were weak, so they fell.

The same thing happens in relationships. No one wants to go through arguments and conflicts. But when those conflicts are handled well and resolved, they end up strengthening the relationship instead of hurting it.

The same thing is true in our faith. When we go through one of the “for worse” times in our faith we have a choice to make. We can abandon our faith and try to go it alone. Or we can lean on the one who has already overcome the world. When we lean on Jesus in those times of trouble and tribulation, we grow stronger in our faith than we were before. We begin to put down deeper roots of faith so that when the storms rage, and people are against us, we can stand firm like Paul and Barnabas did.

Paul as an old man who had already been through what we looked at today and much more, wrote these words to Timothy: **2 Timothy 3:12–14 ESV — 12** Indeed, all who desire to live a godly life in Christ Jesus will be persecuted, **13** while evil people and impostors will go on from bad to worse, deceiving and being deceived. **14** But as for you, continue in what you have learned and have firmly believed, knowing from whom you learned it.

Do you hear Paul’s heart there? We can’t control what people around us will do. We can’t control how they behave, how they will treat us, or how they will respond to the Gospel. The only thing we can do is continue to be faithful to God no matter what. We can continue in what we know to be true, the Gospel of Jesus, no matter what people around us might say or do because of it.

Always remember, our success in God’s eyes is not dependent upon how well we think we’ve done, or how much we’ve accomplished. Our success in God’s eyes is always about how faithful we are to him. Stand firm in your faith, be bold in speaking about Jesus, and be faithful to God for better or worse.