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Acts 14:21-28

Home Again

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“Father in Heaven, we want to be in Your presence. We’ve come here Lord because we want to know You better, we want to serve You better, we are seeking for hope, we are seeking for strength. We want to have a stronger faith. Lord I pray that You will bless these dear people please. I ask that as we open Your Word that You will be the Teacher, You will be the One to impress our minds, our hearts, with the very things we need to hear and experience today. I pray Heavenly Father that all of us will be affected greatly and powerfully by the message from Your Word. Please Lord, teach us. We pray this in Jesus’ name, Amen.”

I have an article, a story I want to read to you. It’s short. I know people don’t like things read to them. But I thought, well I could just tell the story. But it’s so well written that – anyways, it’s called, *Walking a Thin Line*. “On June 30, 1859, thirty five year old, Jean Francqua Gravelee, better known as ‘Blunden’ walked 1100 feet separating the two banks of the Niagara River on a rope stretched 160 feet above the raging waters of the falls.”

Now I want you to look up for a moment. The highest point in this facility is about 50 feet above the ground. 160 feet obviously would be three times that height. He is that high above the Niagara Falls, he walks 1100 feet on a tight rope. That rope is two inches in diameter. “The precarious walk took 20 minutes. When Blunden finally reached safety, he was applauded by thousands of excited spectators. For Blunden it must have been an exhilarating moment. He had been in training since his acrobat father began to teach him the art of tight rope walking at the age of five. After this first success crossing the Niagara became almost a regular stroll for Blunden. Not content simply to walk across he devised ever more audacious stunts including crossing while blind-folded, or pushing a wheelbarrow, or with his feet in a sack, and another time while on stilts. On one occasion, he carried his business manager, Harry Colcord on his back. According to Colcord, the episode was a nightmare from beginning to end.”

“Six times Blunden nearly lost his balance. Fittingly for a Frenchman, Blunden’s most bizarre crossing involved cooking. He carried his small stove half way across and calmly prepared and ate an omelet. Blunden performed equally astonishing feats away from Niagara. In 1861 crowds in London’s Crystal Palace watched in amazement as Blunden on stilts, and without a net, performed summersaults on a rope strung 170 feet above the ground. Blunden’s 50-th year saw him walking a rope strung between two mass of two ships in a storm at sea. He gave his final performance in Belfast in 1896 at the age of 72. He died in London a year later in no more dangerous a spot then bed.”

Amazing! *Walking a Thin Line* is the name of the article. Today I'd like to talk to you about the art of tightrope walking. And we are going to have our study in Acts chapter 14. Please turn there. We are back in the Book of Acts. We've enjoyed our fore into studying about worship. Now we are going back to Paul and Barnabas. We'll read verses 20-28. Acts 14 verse 20: "However, when the disciples gathered around him..." that's Paul, assuming he was dead because he had been stoned, "... he rose up and went into the city. And the next day he departed with Barnabas to Derbe. And when they had preached the gospel to that city and made many disciples, they returned to Lystra, Iconium, and Antioch strengthening the souls of the disciples, exhorting them to continue in the faith, and saying, 'We must through many tribulations enter the kingdom of God.'"

"So when they had appointed elders in every church, and prayed with fasting, they commended them to the Lord in whom they had believed. And after they had passed through Pisidia, they came to Pamphylia. Now when they had preached the word in Perga, they went down to Attalia. From where they sailed to Antioch..." this is Antioch of Syria, the other Antioch was of Pisidia, "...where they had been commended to the grace of God for the work which they had completed. Now when they had come and gathered the church together, they reported all that God had done with them, and that He had opened the door of faith to the Gentiles. So they stayed there a long time with the disciples."

It was there that they had first set out, and it was there that they returned. It was there at Antioch of Syria where they had been called Christians in the first place. Two years have passed since Paul and Barnabas left; many adventures, many experiences, they went back to the home church, back to the home folks, and they were home again. And they shared and it says, "They stayed there a long time."

The story outlines for us four major activities. The first one I want to show you just briefly is what God did. Notice in verse 26: "From there they sailed to Antioch where they had been commended to the grace of God for the work which they had completed." In verse 27 it says: "And when they had come and gathered the church together, they reported all that God had done with them, and that He had opened the door of faith to the Gentiles." The grace of God had been poured out on them to do the work. And God Himself had opened the door of faith for the Gentiles.

So the story is certainly about the work that God did. But it also identifies the work they did, Paul and Barnabas that is, look at verse 21. "And when they had preached the gospel to that city..." in verse 25 it says: "Now when they had preached the word in Perga..." So God gave them grace for the work, God opened doors for them, Paul and Barnabas preached the gospel. They preached the Word. And now, what did the church do? There is a response of the church

and we find that in verse 22. Verse 22, "...strengthening the souls of the disciples, exhorting them to continue in the faith..." The church was a place where the people gathered so that they can learn the messages to continue in the faith, to continue in the faith! It goes on to say in verse 23 that they had appointed elders in every church and prayed and fasted.

So you have three major activities here; the activity of God, the activity of Paul and Barnabas, and then the church itself, the local congregation. And the purpose of the church is for us to gather together, to be strengthened in our discipleship and to grow and learn from one another. This is a place where we can come once a week or if you are able, through the week and you can meet with fellow believers. In this hectic, very busy life that we have, we can come, "Huuuh," sigh; relax for a few moments, be in the presence of the Lord, be encouraged so that when we had out for the rest of the week, we have retooled, we have re-strengthened, we have refueled if you will, that's the purpose of the church.

God, the two, and then the church, and now we are going to look at the individual. Verse 22 says: "...strengthening the souls of the disciples, exhorting them to continue in the faith, and saying 'We must through many tribulations enter the kingdom of God.'" The church would be a place to strengthen the disciples, but individually, it is our call whether we will continue in the faith. And individually we go through tribulations in life. Through many tribulations you enter the Kingdom of God. It is an intriguing thought and I did a lot of studying about it in the scriptures this past week. And what intrigues me is the idea of tribulation. Now I know you folks have had some difficulties, I know you've had some pains. And when I think of tribulations in the context of the Bible and what they went through, I think, you know, where the apostle Paul says: "Anyone who lives Godly in Christ Jesus shall suffer persecution."

And I wonder, in our society, in our culture here in America, do we really suffer persecution because we are Christians? I know it happens around the world, but I am just not convinced it's happening here. We have irritations, we have some minor afflictions, but to say, "Because of my walk with Jesus I actually suffer persecution," in this country, I am not sure that it applies. But continuing in the faith because of affliction is a principle we have to wrestle with. What is fascinating about the concept of tribulation is that if we look at what it meant to the people back then and then apply it to our lives today, we come at it from a different angle. And I hope it will be entirely more meaningful to you from here on because I want to teach you the art of tightrope walking.

You see, there are two Greek words for tribulation or that are interpreted as tribulation. One word is, "to afflict, to oppress, to harass," and all of you have experienced that probably this last week? We have afflictions, we have oppression, we have harassment, we have these irritations. That is one side of the concept of tribulation. The other side of it and these two

words are so closely associated in the Greek language that they are almost inseparable. It's like a coin, one side is head, one side is tails but it's the same coin. The other meaning of the word is, "to press, to squash, to rub, to hem in, to narrow, to squeeze, to compress," and that's a little different meaning. And what is fascinating is Jesus uses that word. The other word which is the sister word to the one used in this passage, He uses it in the Bible one time. You can only find it one time in the Bible. And so in our study we want to see where this takes us? What did Jesus mean when He used it? How did He use it? And what do we learn from it?

Let's go to Matthew chapter 7. Matthew chapter 7 Jesus will be preaching and we are going to read verses 13 and 14. "Enter by the narrow gate, for wide is the gate and broad is the way that leads to destruction, and there are many who go in by it. Because narrow is the gate and difficult is the way which leads to life, and there are few who find it." In verse 14 when Jesus says, "Because narrow is the gate..." If we had been living back then and we had been part of the crowd that heard that, we would have heard that it is a press, it is a squash, it is a rubbing, it is a hemming in, it is a squeezing, it is a compressing to get into the Kingdom of God, to find the right way.

Now when I read that with my understanding, and I like you, I take my understandings currently and I super impose them on the scriptures, and I come to conclusions and many times wrong ones, here is what I think it means. I think it means this narrow road, yes, you have a narrow road and you have a broad road. The narrow road, there is only one way, there is only one right way, that's the narrow road and we are talking about beliefs and practices. So the broad way would be the beliefs and practices of the world. All the small "g" gods you want; all the ways to have the nuking event (?). There are all out there. Everything that's out there; the beliefs and practices of the world would be the wide way.

The beliefs and practices of Christians then logically would be the narrow way. And, hang around Christians long enough and you discover that it is the beliefs and practices of our concept of Christianity. And hang around long enough and you may end up like the pastor and his wife, alone in the church. And he said, "It's you and me, and frankly, I am concerned about thee." And we keep narrowing this down until beliefs and practices, what are the beliefs and practices that are the narrow way, that are the right way, that's how I look at it.

But I am telling you, that's wrong. That's not what Jesus meant, and it's not how the people back then understood it. Jesus used this Greek word that is so closely associated with tribulations that He is identifying this narrow as being like a tight rope. It is not, well let me say, for one thing it's smaller than what we thought. And for another thing, it's different than what we thought. It is not based on beliefs and practices. And I don't want to spoil the whole sermon

by telling you what it is. You'll look at your watch and say, 'hum, hum,' you got to hang in there a little while. Plus we have to have some more scripture.

Look at Luke chapter 13. The Bible says, "Through many tribulations you will enter the Kingdom God." What are these tribulations? What does that mean in a practical way? What did it mean to them? What does it mean to us? Do we all have to have tribulations, and if so, what are they? Luke 13 verse 22: "And Jesus went through the cities and villages, teaching, and journeying toward Jerusalem. Then one said to Him, 'Lord, are there few who are saved?'"

Now let's pause for a moment. This is a legitimate question, it's a good question. "Are there few who are saved?" How many of you would say, "Yes." Hum, we have a couple of people who bravely responded. Are there a few who will be saved? If so, is it because heaven is so restrictive? The Kingdom of God, narrow, small, just one door, one way; is it because of that that there are a few?

Well, let's back up a little bit and see what Jesus says about the Kingdom of God? Verse 18, same chapter, Jesus said: "What is the kingdom of God like? And to what shall I compare it? It is like a mustard seed, which a man took and put in his garden; and it grew and became a large tree, and the birds of the air nested in its branches." Does that seem small to you? He goes on to say in verse 20: "To what shall I liken the kingdom of God? It is like leaven, which a woman took and hid in three measures of meal till it was all leavened." Does that seem small to you, restrictive? Yet, Jesus said: "Strive to enter through the narrow gate," verse 24, "...for many I say to you will seek to enter, and not be able."

Why will they not be able? Says, they are seeking to, why will they not be able? Well, I'll give you the answer of that right out, and then we'll look at it in the scriptures. The reason is they refuse to. Because I want you to know right now none of us are able on our own, right? So we all are disqualified. They were unable, they were unwilling. Because God is not willing that any of them should not be there. So it is a choice they have made!

Well we read on. Jesus continues, verse 25: "When once the Master of the house has risen up and shut the door, and you begin to stand outside and knock at the door, saying, 'Lord, Lord, open for us,' and He will answer and say to you, 'I do not know you. I do not know you or where you are from.'" Now does God know you? Yes! In this parable that Jesus is saying, He likens the master of the house, God; there is an inquiry at the door because the door has been shut. "Lord, Lord open for us!" Jesus continues in verse 26, "Then you..." this is amazing! "Then you!" Jesus is talking to people. They are alive, they are there! There are Jewish people all around Him. And He is saying, "...then you will begin to say, 'We ate and drank in Your presence, and You taught in our streets. But He...' the master of the house, "...will say, 'I tell you I do not know you, where you are from. Depart from Me, all you workers of iniquity.'"

And again, reading it from my mindset, I'll come right back to beliefs and practices. There it is! But it goes on. "There will be weeping and gnashing of teeth, when you see Abraham and Isaac and Jacob and all the prophets in the kingdom of God, and yourselves thrust out. They will come from the east and the west and the north and the south, and sit down in the kingdom of God. And indeed there are last who will be first, and there are first who will be last." Man this is confusing! Jesus said, "You" to a generation of people. "You have Abraham, Isaac and Jacob as your father, and you think that qualifies you for heaven. You think that gives you eternal life." But He is saying, "I don't know you! I don't know you and you can't come in! And you are going to see people from all over the world coming in, but you can't."

And then He even quotes them. He says, "They will say, 'we ate and drank in Your presence.'" They asked the blessing upon their meals. They ate and drank in the presence, they were familiar with God. In fact, it's amazing, almost every Jewish feast that there is, is around a meal of some kind, special foods and all that type of stuff. "We ate and drank in Your presence. We were familiar with you. We listened to Your preaching in the street." Another way to say it is, "We heard Your teachings! We heard them in Sabbath School, we heard them in church, we heard them in our parochial school, we heard them in our home. We heard all about You God, now open the door!"

And Jesus again says, "I don't know you, I don't know you." Wow, what is going on? Again, let's go back to what they would have heard. Jesus says that the gate to heaven is narrow. And by that He means, it presses in on you. How do you get to heaven, by the way? Jesus, definitely, but what do we have to have? Faith in Christ! Jesus said in the scriptures when He returns He wonders if He will find faith. But what is faith? Faith is trusting and depending upon God. In life tribulations come. Let's use the definition afflictions for our setting here. You realize in six weeks of opening our doors, we have had three funerals in this building. Those are afflictions, those are hard times.

This week I attended three funerals. Those are hard times. They are difficult times. These are the afflictions of life. But are they afflictions because we are Christians? I wouldn't say. Jesus would even say in John 16, "...because you are in the world you will have persecution, it's going to be there." And He didn't even say in the context of them, "...because you serve Me." It's the world! So let's be careful lest everything that happen to us, lest we say, oh you know, "It's because I am serving God." So Jesus says, "...the way is pressing, and there are a few who go through that." There are a few who learn to walk the tight rope of faith. What do the many do?

The many do this: "Man, I got this problem, I got this problem, I've got this situation, I've got to deal with this, I've got to deal with that, I've got to do this, I've got to do that, I need to call this person, I need to check on this..." and go on, and on, and on, and on. In marriage, people manipulate, they whine, they fuss, they seek to hurt in order to get their way. That is not what God has in mind for people who are walking by faith. People who are walking by faith will have to stand on that tight rope, the narrow area of faith which says, "I can't do anything, God has to do it for me." That is so contrary to human nature. That is so oriented towards faith that few will do that. Most of us will continue battling in our own strength.

How is it in the parable we just read, Jesus says, "I never knew you." Well, tell me, if you are going to deal with all your problems without God, that's what He is saying, "I don't know you." But in the press of life, as you feel it pressing against you, and you say, "God help me. I've got this relationship problem, I have financial problems, I have health problems, I have emotional problems. I have this difficulty, I have this problem..." on and on and on. God says, "I know that person. They talk to me all the time. We are together in this journey through life. I know them." And that person walks into the Kingdom of God.

This floor here has, it's a wooden floor. Each of the pieces of wood is about three inches wide. And you know what; I can walk pretty safely on three inches. But if you raise that a foot, and ask me to walk, even 10 feet; just a foot of the ground, three inches, I am nervous. I mean, I get really nervous. Raise it ten feet, raise it a 170 feet, and you begin to understand the concept of faith. Brothers and sisters, God wants us to learn what He does, not what we have to do. And so much of our emphasis when it comes to religion is belief and practices. And anybody who is not like us, "...You know, I am right, I am on that narrow thing," but God's issue is not whether you've got it all figured out doctrinally or life-style wise. His issue is - do you really have faith in Him? Are you really depending on Him, or are you still turning to your own resources?

You see, if I say "We have to give God our heart" you may willingly do that because you still have your mind. If I say, "Okay, you need to give your heart and your mind" you may happily do that because you still have your will. If I say, "We need to give our heart, our mind and our will to God," there are a few who will say: "You can have it Lord. I am going to trust You so entirely with my life, You can have my will, You can have my mind, You can have my heart. And I am going to learn the art of tightrope walking."

Now in this article is a fascinating sentence I underlined regarding this fellow named Blunden. He had been in training since his acrobat father began to teach him the art of tight rope walking at age five. Some of you were raised in the church, praise God for that. And some of you are raising children in the church, praise God for that. Just last week I got a letter from our conference president. He said, "Statically 40-50% of the people raised in our denomination, when they reach their twenties, they leave the church. 50% of all the kids raised in our church leave." They may have gone to Sabbath School, may have been in programs upfront, may have gone to our schools, 50% of them are leaving. That's simply not acceptable. That is failure in the highest degree. And I am wondering, I am wondering if maybe we have emphasized beliefs and practices and not learning how to walk with God?

Today I have a challenge for you. And that challenge is - would you like to ask God to teach you how to walk the tight rope of faith? Will you learn to depend upon Him so that when it's all said and when it's all over He will say: "I know you. I know, I know you so well, we've been through so much together." There will be times when we'll feel like we are alone on that rope, but He'll be there. And there'll be times when He will actually be carrying us. But I'll tell you, that is scary. Do you agree? It is scary! But I would like to say, in Your presence, in the presence of God, I want to learn to walk by faith, do you? If you want to learn to walk by faith, please stand and tell the Lord that.

“Oh Father in Heaven, we truly want to walk the tightrope of faith. We have a faith, but it’s not good enough, it’s not strong enough, we recognize it. But we are standing before You humbly and acknowledging that and confessing our sin and saying, oh God please, forgive our sin of lack of faith. And by Your grace, teach us to walk with You by faith. We pray. And Lord, I was going to end the prayer, but I thought of those young people that are out there now. We collectively pray right now, Lord please bring back Your children. Bring them back, we ask in Jesus’ name, Amen.”