

July 9, 2017

Church Planting  
*When Life is Hard*  
Acts 20:7-12

**Opening words:** People ask me about the hardest thing in the ministry. They think it is writing and delivering sermons. They think it is hearing everyone's problems or fielding complaints. They think it is hospital and nursing home visitations. Do you know the hardest thing about my job? It is watching the people you have grown to love and respect go through life's hardships. It is unbearable to watch them endure hardship for no apparent reason. They did nothing wrong, but the disease attacked their body. They did nothing wrong, but the accident happened. They did nothing wrong, but the unthinkable happened. Yet, from my position in life, I have seen God teach us some powerful lessons at those challenging moments. Today, I want to talk about those lessons.

This is sermon number forty-nine in my sermon series, *Church Planting*. You remember my task. During the summer months, I am preaching through the Book of Acts. Why make a major time commitment to the Book of Acts? Because, Acts is the testimony of the Holy Spirit. It is the Holy Spirit who created the church originally and it will be the Holy Spirit who must revive the church again. Our scripture reading for today is Acts 20:7-12. This week's message is called *When Life is Hard*.

**Acts 20:7-12** On the first day of the week we came together to break bread. Paul spoke to the people and, because he intended to leave the next day, kept on talking until midnight.<sup>8</sup> There were many lamps in the upstairs room where we were meeting.<sup>9</sup> Seated in a window was a young man named Eutychus, who was sinking into a deep sleep as Paul talked on and on. When he was sound asleep, he fell to the ground from the third story and was picked up dead.<sup>10</sup> Paul went down, threw himself on the young man and put his arms around him. "Don't be alarmed," he said. "He's alive!"<sup>11</sup> Then he went upstairs again and broke bread and ate. After talking until daylight, he left.<sup>12</sup> The people took the young man home alive and were greatly comforted.

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Todd Stocker is the Executive Pastor of Trinity Church in Hudson, Wisconsin. He once said, "*Even in hardship, God's goodness prevails.*" I completely agree. If you agree, say, "**Amen!**"

You remember the story. It was on the news the other night. Forty-eight year old Miosotis Familia was fatally shot in the head. She was a twelve-year veteran of the New York City Police Department and a mother of three. She did nothing wrong. She was in the wrong place at the wrong time. The shooter was thirty-four-year old Alexander

Bond. He hated the police so he decided to shoot one. Today, her grieving family is wondering why. She did nothing wrong.

You remember the story. It was on the news the other night. The baby's name is Charlie Gard. He was born with a rare genetic condition causing weakened muscles and organ dysfunction. The baby has been in the Intensive Care Unit of London's Great Ormond Hospital for Children. The court ruled the baby has suffered enough. The baby's life support system will be disconnected. The parents want to fight on and bring their son to America for experimental treatment. It is a story where no one really wins. That story grabbed my attention and I had to ask the question: Why? Charlie did nothing wrong.

You remember the story. It was on the news just a few weeks ago. On June 29, there was a traffic accident on Interstate 76. A truck driver from Utah struck another truck. In the end, five vehicles were involved in the crash, killing one person and injuring four. I listened to the details. The truck driver from Utah failed to slow down in the construction area. It was reported quickly that alcohol and drugs were not involved. At first, I heard the driver may have fallen asleep. Now they are saying there was a lack of signage in the construction area. The saddest part of the story is that an innocent man died. His family must be asking why. He did nothing wrong.

In our scripture lesson for today an innocent young man died. He did nothing wrong. Do you remember the story? It was just read to you. Once again, we find ourselves in the twentieth chapter of Acts. According to the text, it is the first day of the week. In other words, it is Sunday. Paul is preaching. The scripture says it clearly. Paul does not preach a short meditation. Paul preaches a full message. The text does not tell us when he started preaching but it does tell us he talked until midnight. Lamps are even brought out to fight the darkness. There is no other way to say it. Paul was a long-winded preacher. (Aren't you glad you don't have a long-winded preacher? 😊) You know the truth. People can only take so much. As Paul preaches on more and more, people begin to drift away. You really can't blame them. They had gotten up early and had put in a full day. With heavy eyes, some of the people even fall asleep. Have you ever fallen asleep in church? It can be embarrassing. In Eutychus' case, it was dangerous. For you see, the brother was seated in the window. His slumber caused him to fall out of the window. Verse nine tells us he fell three stories. That is far enough to kill a man and it did. All these years later, it is still shocking to read. A young man, who did absolutely nothing wrong, died while going to church. Everyone in his life must have asked why. It has been true from the beginning of time. Life is hard! If you will admit that life is hard, say, **"Amen!"**

When was the last time you endured true hardship? In my position, I hear many stories of hardship. Three times every Sunday, I announce prayer concerns. The stories are staggering. How many people do you know who are dealing with cancer? How many people do you know who are battling another disease or condition? How many people

do you know who are struggling to keep their marriage together? How many people do you know who are dealing with an addiction? How many people do you know who are drowning in financial debt? How many people do you know who are wrestling with depression or anxiety? Our society is overrun by hardships. When you were young you believed it would never happen to you, but now you wonder when it will happen to you. That is why our text for today speaks to us. The young man did nothing wrong; he simply went to church. However, he never heard the benediction because he died and everyone wanted to know who was responsible. Let me ask you the question again: When was the last time you endured true hardship?

You have heard me say it in the past. Every day we play the part of Old Testament's Job. Satan does horrible things to us so we will denounce the faith. However, we won't denounce the faith, because we know the truth. If we don't believe in God, then we have nothing at all. God does not cause our suffering and hardship, but God does use our hardships to teach us valuable lessons. That is what I want to talk about today. What have you learned during your times of hardship? I think hardship teaches us four valuable lessons. I want to talk about those lessons today. If you are ready to look at hardship's lessons, say, "**Amen!**"

This is the first lesson hardship teaches: **When life is hard you discover your real friends!** Webster defines an acquaintance as someone you know, though not intimately. Webster defines a friend as a person whom one knows and with whom you have a mutual bond of affection. It has been said, friendship is one soul sharing two bodies. You know the truth. You have many more acquaintances than you do friends. True friendship is hard to find. When life is hard you discover your real friends.

When my sister, Janet, died in December, my entire family flew to Colorado. I officiated at her funeral and was moved by all the friends who came to her service on a Friday afternoon. After the service, the church provided cookies and punch. My brother-in-law, Chris, invited everyone back to his place for an open house. His condominium was filled with all kinds of people. Everyone showed their support by their presence. There was one woman by the name of Shawn, who dominated the gathering. She was a retired military nurse who was an expert on every topic. She was an expert on Janet's disease and talked about their time together. The next morning, I looked at Chris and asked about Shawn, the "expert". He said, "Russ, she is worthless. She disappeared when we told her about Janet's cancer and didn't reappear until last night." How many Shawn's do you have in your life? They act like your friends, but they are just acquaintances. I have witnessed it many times in my life. There is a thin line between being nosey and being concerned. When life is hard you discover your real friends! And all of God's people said, "**Amen!**"

This is the second lesson hardship teaches: **When life is hard you discover your deep strength!** In other words, you will discover if you are a person of integrity. You hope to be a person of integrity, but you really don't know until you are faced with a

hardship. At the end of a long day of hardship, you must be able to look at yourself in the mirror and know you did your best. It is nothing to do with other people. It has everything to do with how you feel about yourself. This is particularly true when you are caring for someone else who is facing hardship. Have you done your best? Are you a person of integrity?

History tells us that the great Michelangelo (1475-1564) painted the Sistine chapel lying on his back. It took endless hours because he longed for perfection. No detail was too small to overlook. A friend asked him why he took such pains with figures that would be viewed from a considerable distance. "After all," the friend said, "Who will notice whether it is perfect or not?" "I will," replied the artist. That story tells us Michelangelo was a man of integrity. He knew that "good enough" was not good enough. It had to be perfect. When you are going through hardship are you just trying to get by, or are you doing your best? In other words, are you a person of integrity? When life is hard you discover your deep strength. And all of God's people said, "**Amen!**"

This is the third lesson hardship teaches: **When life is hard you discover your top priorities!** I am convinced we spend most of our lives worrying about things that really don't matter. We don't spend enough time worrying about things that really do matter. Hardships remind us of the things that really matter. When life is hard you discover your top priorities.

On Thanksgiving Day 2016, the Belton family of Lafayette, Tennessee sat down for the traditional meal. However, that meal tasted better than the Thanksgiving meals of the past. The reason is simple. One week earlier, the family was in a massive traffic accident. They all could have been killed, but they all survived. The husband and father, Jordan, survived. The wife and mother, Angie, survived. Their toddler, Sarah, survived. They don't just see one another as family members anymore. They see each other as a great gift. Angie spoke for them all, "Love your family, love your kids. Every time they walk out the door tell them you love them because you just never know." What are your priorities? When life is hard you discover your top priorities. And all of God's people said, **Amen!**"

This is the fourth and final lesson hardship teaches: **When life is hard you discover your greatest need!** Do I have to say it? Do I really have to say it? Your greatest need is God. It is God who gives us the strength to endure the hardship. It is God who gives us hope for eternity. It was the power of God who resurrected the young man in our scripture lesson for today. If you don't believe in God, then you have no hope at all. People who don't believe in God have the hardest lives of all.

Anne Lamott is an American novelist and non-fiction writer. She is a little earthy for my taste, but she has something to offer. Perhaps you have heard this story? She tells of her son, Sam. One evening he was playing with some other children. He was running around the house and stepped inside the hall closet. He shut the door behind him and

stood in the dark. He was excited because the other children couldn't find him. He was having a wonderful time until he tried to open the door. It was jammed and he began to panic. He began to cry and called for his mother. Anne ran to the closet door but she couldn't open it! So, she called the local fire department. The minutes waiting for the fire department dragged like hours. The little boy grew more and more upset. Anne did the only thing she could do. She sat on the floor on the other side of the door. Then she slid her fingers under the door and told him to touch her fingertips. He did, and he suddenly calmed down. That is why people come to church in the midst of hardship. We simply want to make contact with God to be comforted. Would anyone here feel better just touching God's fingertips? When life is hard you discover your greatest need. Our greatest need is God. Todd Stocker said it best. *"Even in hardship, God's goodness prevails."* And all of God's people said, **"Amen!"**