

Life is full of problems. We know this. And those problems are different for each and every one of us. Maybe it's personal problems. Maybe it's problems you're dealing with at work. Maybe it's problems in the community or even in our nation. Or a combination of any of these. And it's only natural for us to want to find solutions to those problems. We want to fix them. We don't want to have to deal with them all the time. But where? Where do you turn to find answers to your problems? Where do you go to find solutions to the problems of life?

To answer that question we can look at our Epistle reading for today from Acts chapter 14. And in it we meet Paul as he is going along on one of his missionary journeys. And he is coming into a town called Lystra, in south-central of what is now Turkey. And Lystra was kind of an interesting town for him to come to. Because on the one hand, it was an important trading town on an important highway, so there was a lot of business that went on at Lystra. But on the other hand, it was kind of unique. They did their own thing. I'll give you one example of how they did their own thing. They had their own local language. Because the official language of the Roman Empire, of which they were a part, of course was Latin. And the language that everybody around them spoke was Greek. But the language they spoke at Lystra was called Lycaonian. You can imagine how that could cause problems, and in fact it did, as we will see later in our account in Acts 14.

But at any rate, Paul came to Lystra in order to preach the Gospel, but he did so after running into trouble in the town before. Because north of Lystra, about 10 miles or so, was another town called Iconium. And Paul had been preaching the Gospel boldly at Iconium, but it caused him to run into trouble. Because the Jews who lived in that city didn't want to hear the Gospel, and so they even stirred up the city to try to kill Paul, and Barnabas along with him. And so Paul and Barnabas had fled Iconium, heading southward towards Lystra. So you could probably imagine in that situation that Paul might've been tempted to just lie low for a while. All the things he had been doing up in Iconium had caused him to nearly be killed. That was a pretty big problem that he had to deal with. And so he had every temptation to just play it cool for a while, to not say anything, to keep his head down until this all blew over, and then things would be better.

But Paul didn't do that. Paul continued to preach the Gospel boldly, the same Gospel that had gotten him into so much trouble in Iconium. He was not afraid of what might happen because he trusted in God. He trusted in the Lord to take care of him, to provide for all of his needs. And so he was not afraid. He knew that the Lord would help him in the midst of every trouble. And so Paul becomes an example, then, of what it means to turn to the Lord for help in the midst of our problems.

But while he's preaching in Lystra, there's a man sitting in the crowd that we're told was a cripple. And not only was he crippled, it says that he had been crippled from birth. Here was a man who had never walked, and humanly speaking, there was no hope that he ever would. But because of his condition in those days, the only thing that he could really do to support himself was to beg. It's not like he could go get government help or something. It didn't exist. The only way he could get the things he needed was to beg for it each and every day. That's a pretty hard life, a pretty difficult problem that needed an answer.

But when this crippled man heard Paul speaking, he believed what he heard, and he had faith to be made well. Because this crippled man at Lystra turned to the Lord in the midst of his troubles. He knew that God could and that God would do something about his situation. He trusted in him, knowing that he could help. And so this crippled man also becomes an example of what it means to turn to the Lord in the midst of our troubles.

But now Paul does an amazing thing at Lystra. He commands this crippled man to stand up and walk. If Paul was trying to keep a low profile, he was doing a pretty poor job of it! But because of this, God uses Paul to work a very great miracle there in Lystra, causing this crippled man to stand up and to walk as if it was the most natural thing in the world. This was a great demonstration of the power of God. But it didn't have the expected result. Something happened that we might not expect. That's what we hear in verse 11 of our reading: "And when the crowd 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!'" So the whole city is stirred up. They're confused. They're trying to figure out what's going on here. And they're convinced that their gods have come down among them. Because the people of Lystra were not Jews. They were pagans. And so they're thinking like pagans. They totally misunderstand what just happened. Because remember how I said Lystra had its own language? This is exactly why it was a problem. Because Paul had preached the Gospel to them in Greek. And I'm sure that they'd spoke it fairly well, but I'm sure there were some things that they didn't fully understand, as shown by how they react. And the worst part was that Paul had no idea how to speak Lycaonian. He had no idea what was happening until it was too late. So the whole thing is a giant mess. And the people of Lystra are convinced that Paul and Barnabas are gods. Paul they call Hermes, and Barnabas they call Zeus. And they're doing everything that they can to make the gods, so to speak, feel welcome. But the reason why they were doing it was because of fear, fear of what might happen, fear of future problems.

Because if you had stopped somebody in the street on that day, Christians, and you had asked them: "Why are you doing this?", they would've told you a story, a story that was told to us by the poet Ovid. The story went something like this. Long ago in that part of the world, Zeus and Hermes once came down to visit. But when they did so, they came dressed like strangers, dressed like travelers. And they went from house to house, the story went, looking for a place to stay. But each one of those houses turned them away. They wanted nothing to do with them. Until they came to the house of an old couple who not only welcomed them in, but also gave them everything, even at great cost to themselves. And so as a result, that old couple was spared, when Zeus and Hermes destroyed everyone else for their inhospitality. And they would've said, "The gods have come back! Zeus and Hermes are here once again. And so we'd better be sure to treat them right this time so we don't make the same mistake twice!" But instead of turning towards the Lord, the living God, they had turned towards these things. They had turned somewhere else in their fear. They wanted to deal with their problems, even just future problems, by turning to men and to idolatry instead. And so the people of Lystra become an example of what we should not do when it comes to dealing with our problems.

So where do you turn, Christians? Where do you turn for help when dealing with the troubles of life? Do you turn towards the Lord, the way that Paul and the crippled man did? Or do you turn towards something else, the way the people of Lystra did? And no doubt, I'm sure we want to say

we turn towards the Lord for help, which is good. We should do that. But do our words and our actions line up with each other? Do we always mean the things we say? Because I'm sure that we turn towards the Lord in the things that we have no control over. When it comes to things like the weather or rain or whatever it may be, we know we can't do anything about that. So we'll turn to God in those moments. That's not a problem. And we should do that. But what about the things you can control? What do you do then? Do you still turn towards the Lord?

Let's use our health, for example. For dealing with sicknesses of any kind, where do you turn for help? Let's say you've got a bad diagnosis from the doctor. Where do you turn? Or let's say you're even just dealing with some common disease. Let's say you have the flu or a cold. Where do you turn for help? Is your first inclination to turn towards the Lord, to come to him in prayer and ask him to heal you? Or is your first inclination to go to the doctor and maybe get around to asking God about it later, if at all. I'm not saying that medicines and doctors are bad things. That's not at all the point here. They certainly are good things, and God can certainly use them as his means of healing us. But it's also possible for us, Christians, to focus so much on these things, on doctors and medicines, that we forget about the Lord in the process. Because those doctors and medicines aren't going to do anything for us apart from the Lord. It is he who gives us healing. And we have to remember that even if we don't get better, even if the doctors and the medicines do nothing for us, God will still take care of us, because the Lord is our help in the midst of all of our troubles.

Let's use another example: the problems going on in our nation. Our nation is broken, to put it nicely. We have politicians who are really only serving themselves or even saying blasphemous things against God. We have a nation where people are sharply divided against each other, so that we can't even be civil with each other anymore. We have an economy that's broken, with inflation going wildly out of control, and we're all feeling the pinch because of some bad decisions that were made. To say nothing of things like illegal immigration or any of those things. I could go on all day talking about the problems in this nation. But the question is: where do you turn for answers to these problems? Is your first inclination to say, "We just need to get the right guy into office! We just put the right guy in, vote out all of those crooks at Washington, then everything will be better. Then everything will go back the way it should be, and things will go back to normal. We've just got to vote in the right things." In other words, to solve our political problems with more politics.

But Christians, that's not going to solve the problem. Our help is not to be found in men. Our help is to be found in the Lord. He alone can solve the problems of this nation, whether that comes because he chooses to lead this nation to repentance, to lead us back to him to serve him once more, or whether that comes because he chooses to judge this nation, and yet still deliver his people from the midst of all of our evils. God may indeed raise up men to do this. He may raise up people to do that work. But even if he doesn't, he will still be our help in the midst of every trouble. And this isn't a call for us to just sit around and do nothing, either. This isn't just saying: "Oh well, I guess something will happen someday." There's no room for pessimism when it comes to being a Christian. No, this is a recognition that God is the one who controls all things. Jesus is the King of Kings, Christians! He is the Lord of Lords! God is the commander of the heavenly armies, the one who conquers all things, the mighty warrior, our great rock and fortress. He will help us when morning dawns. And when we trust in him, we know that things

will be all right. And he may very well use us for his purposes. He may raise us up to solve these problems. But no matter what happens, God will be our help in the midst of every trouble. God will deal with the problems of our nation. And no matter what happens, he will be with us through it all.

This is why Paul says then in verse 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." So Paul told the people of Lystra on that day to turn away from the things of this world, to turn away from those empty things which could not help them, and to turn towards the living God who made heaven and earth, the only one who could truly help them. And that's what he says to us today too, Christians. To turn towards the Lord in the midst of all of our troubles. To not turn towards the empty things of this world, but to trust in the Lord who will help us through all things. As Psalm 121 tells us: "I lift up my eyes to the hills. From where does my help come? My help comes from the Lord, who made heaven and earth. He will not let your foot be moved. He who keeps you will not slumber. Behold, he who keeps Israel will neither slumber nor sleep." God is not asleep, unaware of what is happening. God is ready to help all of those who call on him. And we know this, Christians, above all because of Jesus Christ his Son. Because if God was willing to give us Jesus to fix the problem of sin, our greatest problem of all, why would he withhold help from everything else? God will help us when morning dawns. So don't wait to turn to him. Go to him in the midst of all of your troubles. And he who made all things and who gave you his Son, Jesus Christ, for you, will help you through all of your troubles.

Let us pray. Lord God, heavenly Father, you are our rock and our fortress in the midst of the troubles of this life. Help us always to turn towards you and not towards the things of this world, knowing that you can and will help us in your Son, Jesus Christ, in whose name we pray. Amen.