

WHAT IF YOU HAD A SECOND CHANCE TO LIVE?

Today's Text: Acts 14: 19- 28

Extracts:

Then Jews from Antioch and Iconium came there; and having persuaded the multitudes, they stoned Paul and dragged him out of the city, supposing him to be dead. However, when the disciples gathered around him, 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 [Acts 14: 19-23]

La'Shaun Armstrong, aged 10, might not have been fully aware of what his mother, La'Shanda Armstrong was going through at the time.¹ His biological father was in jail on robbery charges. He had three siblings, Landon (5), Lance (2) and Laianna (11 months). On Tuesday, 12 April 2011, their distressed mother packed all her four children into her minivan and reportedly drove straight into the frigid waters of the Hudson River near Newburgh, New York, in an apparent suicide attempt. La'Shaun managed to escape through a window and swam ashore to get help from rescue workers. Unfortunately, his mother and siblings could not be saved; they had drowned. His story caught the attention of sympathizers, among whom was Baltimore Ravens linebacker, Ray Lewis. With the help of a few associates, he organised fundraising for the immediate and future needs of La'Shaun. Within weeks, he was assured of \$10,000 towards his education.

La'Shaun could easily have died like the rest of his family but he did not. He survived to lead a better life he least expected was possible. That could also happen to you. Right now, your life is being threatened by lack, persecution or sin. Something tells you that death is any day now. But don't give up. You may have a second chance to live! In this week's Bible story, the apostle Paul was stoned to death by his enemies. But he did not die! He got a second chance to live. We have something to learn from his experience.

¹ Based on Michael Inbar, “Boy who survived Hudson crash: NFL star like ‘brother’,” June 1, 2011; http://today.msnbc.msn.com/id/43236305/ns/today-today_people/t/boy-who-survived-hudson-crash-nfl-star-brother/?gt1=43001#

1. Background: Paul was stoned to death but he lived to tell!

I remember quite vividly that day, Thursday, 18 November 1993, when we went to my hometown in the Midwestern part of Nigeria for my father's burial. As his firstborn son, I had a special role to play. Since I was away abroad for the first part of that month up to Tuesday, the 16th, my wife did most of the planning work. Therefore, I was going to rely heavily on her for the success of the event. She went ahead of me that Thursday morning, carrying most of the money to pay for commissioned activities. But less than a kilometre to our family house, her car was stopped and blocked by heavily armed robbers. Four of them forced her out of the vehicle pointing corked guns at her. She saw death as coming any moment but her faith said otherwise. She found herself on her knees and saying to the armed robbers' hearing, "I thank You, Jesus, for assuring me that I will return to Lagos after this event to give You thanks. Therefore, I am not afraid what man can do on to me." Suddenly, the armed robbers began to shoot into the air! They took only the money in her hand bag (less than 5% of what she was carrying) and the car keys and sped away! She was shaken but unhurt. That second chance to live has radically changed my wife's attitude to life.

It sounds ironic that most people want to go to heaven and yet very few want to die. Most of us do not want to die and yet some of us want to commit suicide. Most of us want to live long but only a few of us want to grow old. How can you explain such contradictions? We have this pathological fear of death and life because we hate uncertainty. Therefore, if we could push death away at any cost, we would. Unfortunately, death is inevitable. Even worse, we do not know when, where or how it will come. That is why the best attitude is to expect it and prepare for it every day. Nevertheless, if we let God have His way with us, we can get a second chance to live when death comes knocking. The question then is what you do with that second chance.

In this week's Bible story, we find Paul and Barnabas on their first missionary journey to the Gentiles. As they spoke boldly to both Jews and Gentiles, under the anointing of the Holy Spirit, signs and wonders followed that drew envy-induced hostility against them [**Acts 14: 1-4**]. Our story takes us to Lystra where a man born a cripple was miraculously healed, and that spelt more trouble for the missionaries. Let us follow the story from there:

a) *Paul 'died'*

At Iconium, unbelieving Jews had stirred up some Gentiles against Paul and Barnabas and poisoned their minds against the local believers. However, the multitude there was divided- one part supported the apostles and the other part supported their opponents. But soon after a cripple was made whole at Lystra, leading to the local people's attempt to treat Paul and Barnabas as gods, the hostility got worse [**vv. 2-18**]. More opponents poured in from Antioch and Iconium and persuaded the multitudes at

Lystra to see the apostles as dangerous blasphemers deserving of death. So, “they stoned Paul and dragged him out of the city, *supposing him to be dead*” [v. 19].

Did Paul actually die or was supposedly dead? In the eyes of his enemies, he had died. That could have been why they stopped stoning him. Paul himself confirmed elsewhere in his writings that he had actually died. Fourteen years after that event, he wrote to the Corinthian church about it [2 Cor. 12: 1-1-4]. He could not say “whether in the body... or whether out of the body,” but “he was caught up into Paradise, and heard inexpressible words, which it is not lawful for a man to utter” [vv. 2, 4]. Enoch [Gen. 5: 23-24] and Elijah [2 Kgs 2: 11] were taken to heaven without first dying but they did not come back. Jesus raised Lazarus back to life after he had been dead for four days [Jn 11: 17, 43-44]. So, we can conclude that Paul was indeed stoned to death by his enemies.

Right now, there are many things about you that your enemies have stoned to death. They have killed your reputation by peddling false stories about you. They have stolen your material blessings by denying you deserved promotion or pay raise at work or in the church. They are laughing at you because they believe that you are finished, that you can never rise again. They have supposed you dead!

b) *But he lived!*

Paul’s enemies took him for dead and left but “when *the disciples gathered around him*, he rose up and went into the city” [Acts 14: 20]! What do you think the disciples that gathered around him were doing? Were they like a curious mob, watching a man dying? When Stephen was stoned to death, “devout men carried [him] to his burial, and made great lamentation over him” [Acts 8: 2]. Why did the disciples not do likewise by carrying Paul out for burial? They did not appear to be trying to revive an unconscious man because we are told that the disciples only gathered around him. Therefore, we can conclude that they were praying for him. Their faith had been strengthened by the signs and wonders that they had seen God perform through them. After Elisha had received a double portion of Elijah’s power, he came to the Jordan River. What did he do when he attempted to cross the river? He struck the water with the mantle that he had received from Elijah and said, “Where is the Lord God of Elijah?” The water parted and he crossed over [2 Kgs 2: 12-14]. In like manner, the disciples that surrounded the limp body of Paul were praying and saying to his God, “Where is the Lord Jesus who has said that greater works we shall do?” God heard their prayers and Paul woke up!

Why then do you think that your situation will be different? What is it that has died around you that God cannot revive? What has happened to your

faith? ***It is only when your faith is dead that everything else around you also dies.***

c) *And Paul continued the work that Christ had assigned him*

As soon as Paul was revived, he went about doing God's work- the work that Christ had sent him. He headed straight to the city (not to a hospital!). The following day, he and Barnabas left for Derbe. He preached there and made many new disciples for Christ, "strengthening [their] souls... exhorting them to continue in the faith, and saying, 'We must through many tribulations enter the kingdom of God.'" Then, he and Barnabas appointed elders in every church there, commending them, with prayer and fasting, to the "Lord in whom they had believed" [Acts 14: 21-25].

You can imagine the reception that Paul and Barnabas received after they had sailed back to Antioch to make an official report of their first missionary journey. Their report placed emphasis on "all that God had done with them and [how] He had opened the door of faith to the Gentiles" [vv. 26-28]. Compare that report with their mandate. When Jesus called Paul, He said that He would use him as a chosen vessel to bear His name among the Gentiles but he would suffer many things for His name's sake [Acts 9: 15-16]. When the time came to begin, the Holy Spirit asked the church at Antioch to separate Him Paul and Barnabas "for the work to which [He had] called them" [Acts 13: 2]. Therefore, ***there was no way that Paul's enemies could kill him before he had completed the work that God had sent him to do. In like manner, no one can take your life before your time if you are working in the will of God.*** That is the lesson that we must learn from this week's study.

2. Get a second chance to live

The word of God says, "All that is in the world- the lust of the flesh, the lust of the eyes, and the pride of life- is not of the Father but is of the world...but ***he who does the will of God abides forever***" [1 Jn 2: 16-17]. It is possible that there is something dead in your life right now that could prevent you from doing or completing the work for which Christ has called you as a labourer into His vineyard. Our God is a God of second chances. The Psalmist says, "I shall not die but live and declare the works of the Lord" [Ps. 118: 17]. The following quick 'scan' of your life can reveal areas where you need to wake up from the dead and live once again:

a) *Physical: The lust of the flesh*

Of late, you may have noticed that your prayer life or frequency at church attendance has dropped significantly. If you scratch beyond the surface, you may find that you have been drawn into habits that lead you to the sins of the flesh, such as fornication or adultery, corrupt enrichment and

such like vices. You are suffering from lust of the flesh. You are paying more attention to foods and drinks, clothes and cars and such-like things without any regard to what they are doing to your physical and spiritual health but the kingdom of God is not about food and drinks but righteousness, peace and joy in the Holy Spirit [**Rom. 14: 17**].

The word of God says that man does not live by bread alone but by every word that proceeds from the mouth of God [**Ex. 8:3; Matt. 4:4**]. What does that mean? It means that any food you eat without applying the word of God will kill you! For example, fornication, adultery and marital relations all mean love-making. All three cases involve a man and a woman. But why does God regard the first two as sins but not the third? It is because only the last is ‘eaten’ in accordance with the word of God. Fornication is sexual relations between an unmarried man and an unmarried woman. Where one of them is married or both are married to others, sexual relations between them is called adultery and it is offensive to God [**Ex. 20: 14**]. Therefore, if you find lust of the eyes gradually killing you, wake up by confessing your sins and returning to a steady relationship with God. Your body is the temple of the Holy Spirit [**1 Cor. 6: 19**]. Therefore, you can no longer afford to pollute it and live. Sin is more deadly than HIV-AIDS. Adultery is a killer, not a thriller!

b) Emotional: The lust of the eyes

When you allow your eyes to wander into envy or greed, you cannot find peace of mind. You may have control over all the material wealth of this world and yet find that you cannot sleep at night. You are suffering from lust of the eyes. You become selfish and uncaring. You fear and worry over things that you cannot control. In no time, your blood pressure shoots up. If it does not kill you, it can paralyse you.

The word of God says, “All the labour of man is for his mouth, and yet the soul is not satisfied” [**Ecccl. 6: 7**]. Be anxious for nothing but if you make your supplications to God with thanksgiving, He will grant you the kind of peace that the world cannot understand [**Phil 4: 6-7**]. Therefore, rather than look at others with envy that is a cancer of the bones [**Prov. 14: 30**], fix your eyes on Jesus who is the author and finisher of your faith [**Heb. 12: 2**]. That way, you will not die but live and declare the glory of God.

c) Spiritual: The pride of life

You may be able to discipline your body against sexual immorality or guard your eyes away from greed, but if you cannot subordinate yourself to God or your superiors, you are suffering from a terminal ailment called the pride of life. That was what took Lucifer out of heaven [**Is. 14: 12-15**]. When you refuse to let go and let God, nobody else can help you. Pride,

they say, goes before destruction, and a haughty spirit before a fall [**Prov. 16: 18**]. Anyone who thinks himself/herself to be something, when he is nothing, deceives himself/herself [**Gal. 6: 3**]. Therefore, become humble and live!

In general, we can conclude that to be carnally minded is death, but to be spiritually minded is life and peace [**Rom. 7: 6**].

3. Conclusion: You shall live because Jesus has died for you!

We all died once when Adam ate the forbidden fruit in the Garden of Eden. Like Paul, our enemy, Satan, took us for dead and went away. But God's will for us is not to stay dead but to have everlasting life through His only begotten Son, Jesus the Christ. He died in our place on the cross at Calvary to make it possible for us to have life and have it more abundantly. However, it is by choice. When you hear Him knocking at the door of your heart and open for Him, then He will come in to resurrect your dead spirit and bring you to His throne of grace that lasts forever and ever and ever. Don't you like that? But if you refuse Him, you have confined yourself to a miserable eternity in hell. Do you like that?

You now have a second chance to live. You can only have it through the One who has died in your place. His name is Jesus!