

Tribulations for the Kingdom

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[0 : 00] Welcome here for this Sunday, April 13th, 2025. My name is Kent Dixon and it's my joy to be the pastor here. I have one of my favorite poets. As you know, I have an English degree background, so I love literature. One of my favorite poets is a man named Malcolm Gite.

And maybe you've heard of him, maybe you haven't. I'll introduce him to you and continue to do that in the days and weeks ahead, I'm sure. His poem is titled simply Palm Sunday.

I know what lies behind the surface flourish that so quickly fades. Self-interest and fearful guardedness. The hardness of the heart, its barricades, and at the core, the dreadfulness of a perverted temple.

Jesus, come. Break my resistance and make me your home. This morning we recognized a day in the church calendar that is known as Palm Sunday.

What is Palm Sunday? Some of you know, not everyone does. It's good to have a reminder. Palm Sunday is recognized by Christians around the world. People are recognizing it with us today around the world.

[1 : 37] And also throughout history. It's the beginning of this week that leads to Good Friday and Easter Sunday. It's the beginning of what we know as Holy Week.

It marks the recognition of Jesus Christ in a very public way. A way that began with celebration and ended with his crucifixion. Palm Sunday is reflected in the words of Matthew 21, 1 to 11.

As they approached Jerusalem and came to Bethphage on the Mount of Olives, Jesus sent two disciples, saying to them, Go to the village ahead of you, and at once you will find a donkey tied there with her colt by her.

Untie them and bring them to me. If anyone says anything to you, tell them that the Lord needs them, and he will send them right away. This took place to fulfill what was spoken through the prophet.

Say to the daughter of Zion, See, the king comes to you gentle and riding on a donkey, on a colt, the foal of a donkey. The disciples went and did as Jesus had instructed them.

[2 : 46] They brought the donkey and the colt, placed their cloaks on them, and Jesus sat on them. A very large crowd spread their cloaks on the road, while others cut branches from the trees and spread them on the road.

The crowds went ahead of him, and those that followed shouted, Hosanna to the Son of David! Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord! Hosanna in the highest!

When Jesus entered Jerusalem, the whole city was stirred and asked, Who is this? The crowds answered, This is Jesus, the prophet from Nazareth in Galilee.

This passage of scripture is one of the few places where the gospels record that Jesus' glory is recognized on earth. Jesus boldly declared himself as king, and the crowds gladly joined him.

But we know how this story ultimately plays out. Those same people who celebrated him would ultimately desert, condemn, and crucify him just a few days later.

[3 : 51] My friends, this public earthly declaration and recognition of who Jesus was is what we recognize on Palm Sunday.

This morning, we're continuing in our ongoing sermon series, Acts to All the World. And through this series, we're exploring the New Testament book of Acts. So if you haven't been here, don't panic.

You probably know the stories. You can listen to past sermons online. It's going to be okay, I promise. So our focus passage this morning, before we dig in, is Acts 14, verses 1 to 22.

So you can grab a Bible from the pew in front of you, turn your Bible app on, whatever you need to do, or you can listen to me as I read it for us. Acts 14, verses 1 to 22.

At Iconium, Paul and Barnabas went as usual into the Jewish synagogue. There they spoke so effectively that a great number of Jews and Greeks believed.

[4 : 48] But the Jews who refused to believe stirred up the other Gentiles and poisoned their minds against the brothers. So Paul and Barnabas spent considerable time there, speaking boldly for the Lord, who confirmed the message by his grace, by enabling them to perform signs and wonders.

The people of the city were divided. Some sided with the Jews, others the apostles. There was a plot afoot among both Gentiles and Jews, together with their leaders, to mistreat them and stone them.

But they found out about it and fled to the Lycaonian cities of Lystra and Derbe, and to the surrounding country, where they continued to preach the gospel. In Lystra, there sat a man who was lame.

He had been that way from birth and had never walked. He listened to Paul, and as he was speaking, Paul looked directly at him, saw that he had faith to be healed, and called out, Stand up on your feet.

At that, the man jumped up and began to walk. When the crowd saw what Paul had done, they shouted in the Lycaonian language, The gods have come down to us in human form.

[5 : 56] Barnabas they called Zeus, and Paul they called Hermes, because he was the chief speaker. The priest of Zeus, whose temple was just outside the city, brought bowls and wreaths to the city gates, because he and the crowd wanted to offer sacrifices to them.

But when the apostles Barnabas and Paul heard this, they tore their clothes and rushed out into the crowd, shouting, Friends, why are you doing this?

We too are only human like you. We are bringing you good news, telling you to turn from these worthless things to the living God, who made the heavens and the earth, and the sea, and everything in them.

In the past, he let all the nations go their own way. Yet he has not left himself without testimony. He has shown kindness by giving you rain from heaven and crops in their seasons.

He provides you with plenty of food and fills your hearts with joy. Even with these words, they had difficulty keeping the crowd from sacrificing to them. Then some Jews came from Antioch and Iconium and won the crowd over.

[7 : 06] They stoned Paul and dragged him outside the city, thinking he was dead. But after the disciples had gathered around him, he got up and went back into the city. The next day, he and Barnabas left for Derbe.

They preached the gospel in that city and won a large number of disciples. Then they returned to Lystra, Iconium, and Antioch, strengthening the disciples and encouraging them to remain true to the faith.

We must go through many hardships to enter the kingdom of God, they said. Just a refresher from last week, quickly. Last week, we learned that Paul and Barnabas had gone to a city called Pisidian Antioch.

Remember, different from Antioch where the church began. This is Antioch in a place called Pisidia. And we recognized that they experienced success there, right? They preached the gospel.

People's lives were changed and they believed. But we also recognized that they experienced resistance and conflict. And while they were ultimately kicked out of that city, we recognized that they left joyful new converts to Christianity behind.

[8 : 17] So our sermon this morning is titled, Tribulations for the Kingdom. Sounds light and fun, hey? Picking up on that journey this morning, Paul and Barnabas then went from Pisidian Antioch, the place we talked about last week, to the cities, and we heard this morning in our passage, the cities of Iconium, Lystra, and Derbe.

And these were all cities in Asia Minor, which is modern-day Turkey. So that gives you some context. Their mission to this place ultimately established churches in the Galatia region of Asia Minor.

And Paul likely wrote his letter, by the way, Galatians, wrote his letter, which we now know as the book of Galatians, to the churches in this region. 2 Timothy 3, verses 1 to 11 says, You, however, know all about my teaching, my way of life, my purpose, faith, patience, love, endurance, persecutions, sufferings.

What kinds of things happened to me in Antioch, Iconium, and Lystra? The persecutions I endured. Yet the Lord rescued me from all of them, Paul says.

So as was the case in Pisidian Antioch, Paul's referring to it, you hear it there, in his letter to Timothy. He and Barnabas found success in this mission, mixed with, of course, again, harsh treatment.

[9 : 44] So what was this mission like? Let's dig into this a little bit together. Well, at Iconium, we read that Paul and his companions spent considerable time in this city of Iconium.

They were speaking boldly in the Lord, and there were signs and wonders that accompanied this in Jesus' name. And as with their previous trip, they began with a visit to the local synagogue.

And remember, I've talked about, this was Paul's MO, right? He would go to a city, he would go to the local synagogue, and preach to the people there first. And so unbelieving Jews, we read, stirred up the Gentiles against them, right?

These two different groups that didn't always get along joined forces against Paul and Barnabas.

And the city eventually became divided between the Jews and the apostles.

And there's that conflict again, right? And you may have heard this, noticed it in the passage, Paul and Barnabas are referred to as apostles in verse 14.

[10 : 46] Even though, hopefully you're going, wait a minute, there was 12. They were not part of the original 12. So it's notable that they're referred to as apostles here.

And this may be because, remember we talked about, they were sent by the Holy Spirit. The Holy Spirit specifically sent Paul and Barnabas on these missions. And it may be also, that they were not called apostles in the same sense, right?

So I think sometimes terminology is used differently, but it's notable, right? Maybe it's capital A apostles is the 12th, lowercase is different. And we've also talked in the past about how people tend to maybe get confused between the terminology apostles and disciples, right?

We think of, well, wasn't there 12 disciples? Yes, they were disciples. They were also apostles.

Well, am I not a disciple? Yes. But I'm an apostle? No. Clear as mud?

Perfect. So tensions and hostility ramped up again. Everybody's looking and laughing at each other. That's always good. But we learned that the people wanted to persecute and even stone Paul and Barnabas.

[11 : 59] But fortunately, did you catch that they heard about it? They, there was a rumor. So they learned about these plans that were coming against them and they were able to escape and flee to the cities of Lyconium, or Lystra, sorry, and Derbe.

So what about Lystra? Well, the city of Lystra was located in the Lyconian region, which is now part of modern-day Turkey, right? These cities are all in Turkey.

And we learned that Paul and Barnabas preached throughout that entire area. So not just these three cities, but the area around as well. And so reminiscent of some of the acts that Jesus himself performed during his ministry, Paul healed a lame man.

Did you catch that in the passage? And Paul saw that this man had the faith to be healed. That is the connection in all of the healing that we see. People demonstrate faith and they're healed of whatever is ailing them.

So it's interesting to learn that the Gentiles assumed that Paul and Barnabas were incarnations of the Greek gods Hermes and Zeus, respectively.

[13 : 08] So I've told you before, I took lots of courses in classical mythology. So whenever I read this, I think, oh, neat. But you can see, right, how this was their culture, this was their understanding of divinity and gods, plural.

And so in a pantheistic society, they would have realized, okay, well, this is the best way we can understand who you guys are. So it may be that the Gentile listeners recognized the power of the message.

They recognized the miracles that these men performed. And this was the only way they could pin that down in their minds. The only frame of reference they had for anything that defied their own human understanding, right?

So the gods that they had learned about, had come to believe in, this was the only way they could pin down the miraculous in their context. But whatever the reason, Paul and Barnabas reacted strongly to this, didn't they?

You don't tear your clothes that often, at least I don't. But they reacted to this perspective. They saw it right away. This perspective from the people was confused, and they were giving attention to the wrong thing, to them, rather than to God.

[14:26] So they acted right away to correct this view. So the two men proclaim right away that there is one living God, the creator of all things.

So they're saying, okay, let's reorient your understanding of creation. And even with their attempts to reorient the attention of the crowd, to redirect it, they seem to have struggled still to keep them from offering sacrifices to them personally.

Like Jesus did during his ministry, Paul and Barnabas likely gathered groups of followers who were eager to hear more of the message they were preaching. Right?

And we've heard that, that people follow them to learn more. But unfortunately, not all groupies are good ones. Is that fair? We learn that the Jews from Antioch and Iconium seem to have followed Paul and Barnabas.

They manage to persuade the crowd to actually have Paul, grab Paul, drag him out of the city, stone him, and leave him for dead.

[15:31] That's some pretty passionate people to follow with the intent to hurt, to injure. So we learn that the tenacious Paul, right, we've talked about how Paul is, Paul is a force, right, in scripture.

He goes back into the city. So he gets up, kind of goes, oh, I'm not as hurt as I thought I was, and goes back to the mission that the Holy Spirit gave him.

So presumably to get Barnabas, right? So where is Barnabas? This has happened to me. I need to make sure he's okay. So he gets Barnabas, and they leave Lystra to head for the city of Derbe the next day.

What about Derbe? Well, contrary to what you might think, the city of Derbe was not in modern-day Kentucky. That's not where. Located southeast of Lystra, so all in the same area, general area.

And it was located in an area that's southwest central modern-day Turkey. So go home, take out your map, mark these cities. I'll check your work next Sunday.

[16:39] Paul and Barnabas had an almost singular focus in this mission. And we learn that when they arrived in Derbe, they continued to preach the gospel, and that they made many disciples.

So what's interesting to me, fortunately, it doesn't seem they were persecuted or abused there. So that had started to be a theme of this mission, but in Derbe, at least there's no mention of it in Scripture that it happened there.

So it seems Paul and Barnabas retraced their steps after this immediate mission. They returned to Lystra and Iconium and then back to Antioch.

So interesting, do we generally go back to a place where we've been mistreated? Do you nurture the friendships that beat you up? Maybe not. Not necessarily.

But they do that, right? They're focused on this mission and they want to ensure that the mission the Holy Spirit has given them and the work that they have already done in Jesus' name is planted and anchored.

[17:44] So they return to those places and their focus, Scripture tells us, was on strengthening the disciples there and encouraging them to remain true to the faith.

Right? So they're checking in and they're shoring things up to make sure people are in good shape. So our story this morning ends in Acts 14, verse 22.

And the words of Paul and Barnabas right there are, we must go through many hardships to enter the kingdom of God, they said. We must go through many hardships to enter the kingdom of God. So not surprisingly, the experiences of Paul and Barnabas on this journey and their words there have, maybe for you, and others certainly, caused Christians to wonder, will all Christians suffer tribulations for the kingdom?

Good question. Have you ever thought that? Maybe you have, maybe you haven't. Well, the apostles certainly did, didn't they? In Matthew 10, verse 22, Jesus said, you will be hated by everyone because of me.

[18:56] But the one who stands firm to the end will be saved. Jesus predicted and foretold that the apostles would suffer tribulation for the kingdom.

In 1 Corinthians 4, 9-13, 2 Corinthians 4, 8-10, and then 2 Corinthians 11, 23-29, Paul spoke about these things over and over, the tribulations that he and others would face.

Paul recognized that that was going to happen. So while there's no firm and concrete evidence, for sure, Christian tradition suggests that all of Jesus' apostles, remember the 12th?

That's the 12th. Aside from John, John was exiled, all of the others were martyred for the kingdom and the faith. 11 out of 12.

Early Christians suffered, right? We've talked about that before. As we know, before his conversion, Saul was a great guy, wasn't he? He loved Christians, loved them to death.

[20 : 04] Saul viciously persecuted Christians, personally approved of the stoning of Stephen. He approved of that to happen. And we learn from Paul's letters to the churches in both Thessalonica and Philippi, Thessalonians, Philippians, that believers in those communities experienced tribulations and suffering at the hands of their own people and others as well.

And it's reasonable to believe that many Christians suffered for what they believed, what they taught, what they stood for in their communities, and the world at large.

But, not all early Christians experienced suffering and tribulation. We know from our earlier exploration in Acts that while there were periods of suffering and trials, you maybe remember this, there were also periods that we've talked about of peace for the church, for believers in general. We also know from the book of Revelation that the church in Philadelphia was identified as one that would be spared from the final conflict that was to come. Not all Christians, early Christians, would suffer.

So do you feel confused or conflicted at all about Paul and Barnabas said, we will all suffer, and yet, this doesn't seem to connect. So if suffering and tribulations may inevitably come our way, specifically as a result of what we believe, who we serve, why should we pray for peace?

[21 : 38] Right? If we're all going to suffer, why pray for peace? Why aspire to have quiet lives? If we're all going to suffer, if that's the indication. So what did Paul mean there?

Well, it sounds in Acts 14, verse 22, as though we must go through many hardships. That's what Paul and Barnabas are talking about, to enter the kingdom of God. It feels like a rite of passage, to some extent.

Right? And in 2 Timothy 3, verse 12, we read, in fact, everyone who wants to live a godly life in Christ Jesus will be persecuted.

So as is the case, whenever we want to study scripture, whenever we want to understand it better, we need to consider the context. So to whom did Paul say these things?

We will all suffer. When did he say them? Was Paul speaking about a specific group of people or to a specific group of people who would somehow receive a privilege to suffer?

[22 : 40] Well, Paul says in Philippians 1, 29 and 30, for it has been granted to you on behalf of Christ, not only to believe in him, but also to suffer for him.

Since you are going through the same struggle you saw I had, and now hear that I still have. So Philippians 1, 29 to 30, in essence, emphasizes that believers are given the grace to both believe in Christ and to suffer for him, should that come.

So Paul's relating his own story of belief and suffering as an experience, and ultimately a privilege that he shared with others on his own faith journey.

There was a connection that they shared, right? He had suffered and could relate to their suffering. And we can also recognize that the early church existed in a time and a place where they might be more prone to persecution.

It could have potentially been more of a factor for early Christians. Christians. So that's obviously not in any way to discount or minimize the fact that we have brothers and sisters around the world who are very much exposed to the reality of suffering and persecution for their faith right now.

[24 : 02] Not all Christians who formed the early church suffered persecution from other people. Christians were also not taught, we don't see it in the New Testament, any teaching, to seek out persecution, right?

Go and suffer because that's a good thing. That's not a message. In Matthew 10, 23, Jesus instructed the apostles that they could, in fact, flee from persecution if they were able to.

And we know that Paul fled from persecution when people were trying to kill him in his early ministry. We know that if followers of Jesus were persecuted for the cause of Christ specifically, they were told to glorify God in that, right?

Point back to God and to rejoice for that honor. Hard words. So this morning we've considered the example of Paul and Barnabas, the example that they've given to us yet again and we'll see more

examples from them in the days ahead.

They suffered tribulations for the kingdom of God. We saw it. But they personally didn't give up preaching the gospel. The persecution they experienced didn't hinder the growth and development of the church or the broader preaching and spread of the gospel.

[25 : 23] The kingdom of God will not be stopped. So while we may not suffer the kind or scope of persecution that Paul, Barnabas, the apostles, others in the early church did or even our brothers and sisters in churches around the world that I mentioned, we might still face other forms of persecution like being ridiculed.

Ever been made fun of for your faith? Raise your hand. Oh, come on. Three hands. Everybody's been made fun of somehow. We might face those forms of persecution.

Have you ever been ostracized by a friendship? Have you ever had somebody say, wow, that is weird. We are no longer friends. It's happened to me. As faithful followers of Jesus Christ, we must always be prepared to point people to Jesus.

To give our own experience and testimony for what we believe, who he is, what he has done. We need to be prepared to suffer if that should ever become our reality.

Are we preparing ourselves with the proper mindset should persecution come our way? Are we genuinely willing to suffer for Christ?

[26 : 47] My brothers and sisters, ask God for the strength to be quick to forgive people who persecute you in whatever form that may take. And for the boldness to proudly and confidently proclaim the story, the gospel, the truth of Jesus Christ until he comes again.

Amen.