

PM Acts 14:1-23 Continue in the Faith

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- [0 : 0 0] Well, let's turn now for our reading to Acts chapter 14, reading the first 23 verses.
- Almost, but not quite, all of the chapter. So, when I've been preaching here on the Lord's Day, I've been going through the missionary journeys of Paul.
- We're still on the first missionary journey. And here we find him at Iconium, Lystra, and Derbe. So, Acts 14, verses 1 to 23.
- Now, at Iconium, they entered together into the Jewish synagogue and spoke in such a way that a great number of both Jews and Greeks believed.
- But the unbelieving Jews stirred up the Gentiles and poisoned their minds against the brothers. So they remained for a long time, speaking boldly for the Lord, who bore witness to the word of his grace, granting signs and wonders to be done by their hands.
- [1 : 3 1] But the people of the city were divided. Some sided with the Jews and some with the apostles. When an attempt was made by both Gentiles and Jews, with their rulers, to mistreat them and to stone them, they learned of it and fled to Lystra and Derbe, cities of Lycaonia, and to the surrounding country.
- And there they continued to preach the gospel. Now, at Lystra, there was a man sitting who could not use his feet.
- He was crippled from birth and had never walked. He listened to Paul speaking. And Paul, looking intently at him and seeing that he had faith to be made well, said in a loud voice, stand upright on your feet.
- And he sprang up and began walking. 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.
- Barnabas, they called Zeus and Paul Hermes, because he was the chief speaker. And the priest of Zeus, whose temple was at the entrance of the city, brought oxen and garlands to the gates and wanted to offer sacrifice with the crowds.
- [3 : 1 9] But when the apostles Barnabas and Paul heard of it, they tore their garments and rushed out into the crowd, crying out, 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 heavens and the earth and the sea and all that is in them.
- In past generations, he allowed the nations to walk in their own ways. Yet he did not leave himself without witness, for he did good by giving you rains from heaven and fruitful seasons, satisfying your hearts with food and gladness.
- Even with these words, they scarcely restrained the people from offering sacrifice to them. But Jews came from Antioch and Iconium, and having persuaded the crowds, they stoned Paul and dragged him out of the city, supposing that he was dead.
- But when the disciples gathered about him, he rose up and entered the city, and on the next day, he went on with Barnabas to Derbe.

[4 : 51] When they had preached the gospel to that city and had made many disciples, they returned to Lystra and to Iconium and to Antioch, strengthening the souls of the disciples, encouraging them to continue in the faith, and saying that through many tribulations, we must enter the kingdom of God.

And when they had appointed elders for them in every city, in every church, with prayer and fasting, they committed them to the Lord in whom they had believed.

Let's turn now to Acts chapter 14. And I'll read again by way of text, verses 21 to 22.

And when they had preached the gospel to that city, Derbe, and had made many disciples, they returned to Lystra and to Iconium and Antioch, strengthening the souls of the disciples, encouraging them to continue in the faith, and saying that through many tribulations, we must enter the kingdom of God.

Those of you who were here this morning will notice some similarity with our text this morning. Colossians 1.23 Paul said there that Christ will present you holy and blameless at the last day if you continue in the faith.

[6 : 53] Here he encourages these new disciples at Lystra, Iconium and Antioch to continue in the faith. exactly the same phrase.

The Christian life is often compared with a race. I used that comparison myself this morning. And like any race, it must be run to the end.

Our son runs marathons and he knows that the race is over 26.2 miles. There are no prizes for running 25 miles.

No one's going to congratulate you and say you almost finished. You must run the whole race from start to finish.

Along the way, there might well be times when you feel like giving up. You might twist your ankle after one mile and need medical attention and see all the other runners disappearing out ahead of you.

[8 : 09] Or you might be so tired after 20 miles that you can scarcely move your legs. But a true athlete will keep on going. Even if he finishes hours after everyone else, he will still complete the race.

And so it is with the Christian race. There are many obstacles along our way. Many tribulations as Paul puts it here.

But the true Christian will keep going. He may struggle for much of the way. He may only limp over the line. But he knows that that prize is only for those who can say with Paul in 2 Timothy, I have run the race.

Paul knew from experience how hard it would be. He knows how hard it will be for these Christians. But he encourages them to keep going.

And he would give us the same advice today. challenges we face in the 21st century are very different from those of the 1st century.

[9 : 32] But the principle is the same. We must continue in the faith to the end no matter what difficulties lie along the way.

And the Lord who saved us will support us right through to the end. I want us to consider this evening Paul's experience in these churches and then Paul's advice to them.

First, Iconium in verses 1 to 7. Let me remind you of the background. Paul and Barnabas have been called into missionary work.

they've set out from Antioch in Syria. They've preached the gospel throughout Cyprus then crossed over to the mainland and gone up into the mountains to Antioch in Pisidia.

There they've preached in the synagogue with mixed reactions. many believed but many didn't. Causing Paul to say, Acts 13 46, we are turning to the Gentiles.

[10 : 53] And he and Barnabas had continued to preach to the Gentiles and they had had much success. The word of the Lord had spread. But then persecution had forced them to leave.

At the end of chapter 13 they went on to Iconium. Modern day Konya about 95 miles away.

And their experience there is very similar. Success and persecution. They very often go together.

Success and persecution. first success. In verse one they entered together into the synagogue and spoke in such a way that a great number of both Jews and Greeks believed.

Notice first that they entered the synagogue. They hadn't given up on the Jews. Nor should we.

[12 : 06] And they entered together. Paul and Barnabas did everything together. Jesus sent out his disciples two by two and they were following in that same practice.

Two people together can encourage one another when things get tough. And two people together can keep a check on each other. If Paul had misinterpreted an Old Testament scripture I'm sure that Barnabas would very graciously and gently have put him right.

And vice versa. The Old Testament said by the mouth of two or three witnesses every word shall be established. Well here are two faithful witnesses of the Lord Jesus Christ.

there's a lesson here surely for us today that we need to work together in the work of the gospel. When we try to do things on our own even though we're trusting in the Lord we may still find it hard because the Lord has so constituted the church that we need each other.

We need encouragement. many areas of work in the church there needs to be more than one person involved.

[13 : 42] When it says that they spoke in such a way that many believed that implies a powerful message. And the word of God is powerful isn't it?

Sharper than any two-edged sword. It implies also a powerful delivery. They preached with conviction. Sometimes we imagine that it doesn't really matter.

The power is all with God and so it doesn't matter if the preacher is boring. The Lord will still speak through him. Well, sometimes he does. But the Lord wants his preachers to preach with conviction because they truly believe what they're saying.

But it implies above all, I think, that the Spirit of God was with them. No one is ever converted unless the Spirit is at work.

Persecution, however, soon followed. In verse 2, the unbelieving Jews stirred up the Gentiles and poisoned their minds against the brothers.

[14 : 54] Nothing surprising there. Jesus said, if they persecuted you, they will persecute me. If they persecuted me, they will persecute you also.

But did that stop them? Of course not. If anything, it seems to spur them on. In verse 3, so they remained for a long time.

I love that phrase. Somehow you would expect it to be different, wouldn't you? The unbelieving Jews persecuted people's minds against them, so they decided to move on.

No, they didn't. So they stayed a long time and kept on preaching there. They were speaking boldly for the Lord.

And extraordinary things happened. unusual things. The Lord bore witness to the word of his grace granting signs and wonders to be done by their hands.

[16 : 05] Signs and wonders. It's a big subject in the modern church, isn't it? There are many churches around that would insist that we have to have signs and wonders, otherwise we can't seriously claim to be a proper church.

Well, I would just point out that in Acts 13 in Antioch in Pisidia, there were no miracles mentioned at all.

They simply preached the word, proving that miracles are not essential for the work of the gospel. people. They were, however, a feature of Paul's ministry in many places.

He calls them elsewhere the signs of an apostle. They were the proof that he was an apostle of Christ. Jesus worked miracles to prove that he was sent by God.

the apostles worked miracles to prove that they were sent, specially sent, from Christ. The reason we don't expect miracles constantly today is because we don't have apostles today.

[17 : 27] And therefore, there is no need for the sign of an apostle. We continue simply with the preaching of the word, as it was in Antioch in Pisidia, as it was in Athens and in many other places, even in those New Testament days.

But here there were signs and wonders, and what an impression that must have made. But even miracles won't convince everyone.

The people are divided. In verse four, some sided with the Jews, some with the apostles. And then it turns ugly. The rulers get involved.

And then there is an attempt to stone them. And they flee the city. Nothing shameful in that. Jesus said, if they persecute you in one city, flee to the next.

There was no point in them getting killed. There was still a lot of work for them to be done. their aim was that they might continue preaching the gospel.

[18 : 43] That idea of continuing yet again. And so we come to the second church, the second city, Lystra, a city of Lycaonia, about 20 miles away, verses 8 through to 20.

And this is a very different experience. Lystra was a smaller city, a more rural area. It was a Roman colony.

And there doesn't appear to have been a synagogue. But Paul found somewhere to preach. And straight away, there's a miracle.

The man there crippled from birth, and Paul sees somehow that he had faith to be healed. and at Paul's command, he sprang up and began walking.

If you know your New Testament, you'll recognize straight away that this is very similar to the man at the beautiful gate in Acts chapter 3.

[19 : 54] And one of the themes in Acts is that Peter and Paul were equals. Peter preaching to the circumcision, Paul preaching to the Gentiles predominantly.

Peter had preached to the Jews in Jerusalem in Acts 2, and then healed a lame man. Paul likewise has been preaching to the Jews in the synagogues, and then he heals a lame man.

It's the same pattern, isn't it? And both miracles drew a crowd. In Acts 3, it was a Jewish crowd. Here, it's a pagan crowd.

And suddenly, Paul is confronted with a challenge quite different from anything he had faced before. the people proclaimed them as gods.

The gods have come down to us in the likeness of men, they say. Only a god could possibly heal people, that's their reasoning. They were pagans, they believed in these Greek gods.

[21 : 12] It must be that the Greek gods have come down to us in human form. But they say it in the local language, so that Paul and Barnabas don't straight away understand.

Barnabas they call Zeus, chief of the gods. Paul, Hermes, the messenger of the gods because he was the chief speaker.

And the priest of Zeus comes out with oxen and garlands to offer sacrifice. Apparently, there was a local legend that the gods had once come down in the form of men.

And they think that it's happening again. And if only they knew it, they were not so very far from the truth. God had come down in the form of a man.

In Jesus Christ, the same Jesus whom Paul was preaching to them. But Paul doesn't immediately try to explain that.

[22 : 18] His first task is just to stop them from offering sacrifice. When they understand what's happening, the apostles, Barnabas and Paul, they're both called apostles, notice, throughout this chapter, they tore their clothes and rushed out saying, men, why are you doing these things?

We are also men of like nature with you. And we bring you good news that you should turn from these vain things to the living God.

There is a book, I think it's by Rudyard Kipling, The Man Who Would Be King. It was made into a film. It's about two British soldiers in some remote part of Central Asia who are mistaken for gods.

And they're tempted by it. They lap up the attention, they live as gods until they're found out and the people take a terrible revenge on them.

Paul and Barnabas were not tempted, not for one moment. Instead, they tell them about the living God who made the heavens and the earth and the sea and everything in them, who in past generations allowed the nations to walk in their own ways, worshipping these false gods.

[23 : 46] Though he'd given them proof of his goodness by giving them rain and fruitful seasons and food and gladness. this is very different from his sermon in the synagogue, isn't it?

No Old Testament quotes here. No point. These people were pagans and didn't know the Old Testament. No immediate attempt to prove that Jesus is the Messiah.

They don't know what he means by the Messiah. He's heading there, of course. When he preaches in Athens, he gets one little stage further and he says, God now commands all men everywhere to repent.

Given time, I expect here he would have spoken of sin and their need of a saviour and of God sending a saviour in Jesus Christ. And they would have got eventually to the same point that they got to in the synagogue.

But the starting point is different. He's starting where they are with creation and providence. In our post-Christian world, we have to sometimes start where people are.

[25 : 13] Leading them gently to Christ, having begun with the things that they really don't know. The very existence of God.

God being the creator. God being the provider of all the good things that we have. For many people, that's the starting point. And hopefully, by the grace of God, we're able to lead them beyond that.

That is not the gospel in itself. But it is a starting point to lead people on to the gospel of Christ. But Paul never got to that point.

It was as much as he could do to stop them from offering sacrifice. And then in verse 19, Jews came from Antioch and Iconium, and having persuaded the crowds, they stoned Paul and dragged him out of the city, supposing him to be dead.

But of course he wasn't. When the disciples gathered around, he rose up and went into the city, completely unafraid.

[26 : 23] And the next day, he went on with Barnabas to Derbe. I don't think that this was an actual miracle of resurrection, but it was still a miracle that he recovered so quickly from being stoned.

And a miracle too, that there were already disciples here. He must have only been preaching for a few days, but already there are enough believers, apparently, to form a church.

And not long afterwards in chapter 16, we read of a famous disciple there, Timothy, who became Paul's companion. Success, even in the midst of persecution.

Concerning Derbe, there are no details given, we're just told in verse 20, they preached the gospel and made many disciples.

And then they return, retracing their steps, gathering the disciples in each of these new churches. churches. Which brings us to Paul's advice in verses 21 to 23, where Paul tells them to continue in the faith.

[27 : 49] Now let me first make the obvious point that he is speaking here to Christians. You can't continue what you haven't begun. If he were preaching to the lost, then he would still be saying to them, believe on the Lord Jesus Christ.

But speaking to Christians, he says, continue believing. Now bear in mind the circumstances.

These are all new Christians. They have only come to faith, at the most, a few months before. And they have been born into the fire.

When Barnabas and Paul fled from each city, they had left these disciples behind. They would have to face persecution from the very first day.

Many of their former friends would reject them. The unbelieving Jews would poison people minds against them. They would be hated, ridiculed, told that they were traitors to their religion, whether they were Jews or pagans.

[29 : 09] They would have to find their own way as Christians without an apostle to guide them, with only the word and the Holy Spirit to help them as if we needed more.

There was no option for them to move on to the next city. This was their home. They had to stay there. And they had to face these tremendous challenges.

So what do Paul and Barnabas, still working together, notice, say to them? Three things. Firstly, they strengthened the souls of the disciples.

We don't have their actual words, but we can imagine that they reminded them of how much God loved them, how he'd sent his son to save them, what great plans he had for them as his church, what tremendous resources they had in the Lord, how the Lord was their rock and their shepherd and their guide and their comforter and their king, how he'd given them his spirit and how he'd given them the hope of heaven.

We still need to have our souls strengthened today. Sometimes we do need to be told of our sins, but I don't think it's helpful if week after week we're being torn to shreds, continually shown nothing except how awful we are.

[30 : 54] Yes, by all means, we must face ourselves in the mirror of the word. Yes, we must hear the truth, but we also need to hear the positive side of the truth.

We also need to hear of the good things that are ours in Christ. We need to be strengthened in this difficult world in which we live.

Secondly, they encouraged them to continue in the faith. As we saw this morning, continuing is a theme all the way through the New Testament.

Jesus said, if you continue in my word, you are my disciples indeed. Paul told the Colossians to continue in the faith. Hebrews 3.14, we are to hold our original confidence firm to the end.

Hebrews 4.14, we are to hold fast our confession. Hebrews 10.36, you have need of endurance, so that when you have done the will of God, you may receive what is promised.

[32 : 06] Hebrews 12.2, let us run with endurance the race that is set before us, looking unto Jesus, the author and finisher of our faith.

This is not something we can do in our own strength, and we are not expected to do it in our own strength. We are able to persevere in the faith only because God is persevering with us, upholding us, strengthening us, protecting us, keeping us to the end from all kinds of dangers, both within and without.

Paul says to the Philippians, he who began a good work in you will bring it to completion at the day of Jesus Christ. Jude says he is able to keep you from falling.

You can't keep yourself from falling, but he can keep you. nonetheless, the responsibility rests upon us to keep going, to put one foot in front of the other, to keep running even when we're weary, knowing that we are in the way of life.

Finally, there's the warning, through many tribulations, we must enter the kingdom of God. we've seen already some of the tribulations that they faced, persecution, misunderstanding, rejection, hatred, death threats possibly.

[33 : 45] Paul and Barnabas had been persecuted, they must expect the same. But no matter, as Jesus said, fear not, little flock, it is the Father's good pleasure to give you the kingdom.

kingdom. The kingdom in the New Testament is both now and not yet.

They had entered the kingdom already the moment they believed. But one day they would see that kingdom in glory when Christ the King returned and they would share in his reign forever.

tribulations are unavoidable. Psalmist says many are the afflictions of the righteous.

Jesus said in the world you will have tribulation. Paul wrote later to Timothy from Lystra, all who would live godly in Christ Jesus will suffer persecution.

[34 : 53] You can't avoid it. they must pass through the waters of tribulation because that is the way that the path lies.

But God is with you and God will bring you safely through. The cross will lead to the crown.

The kingdom will be yours. God will say to us. Well much the same.

If he was speaking to non-Christians he would say believe. Don't be put off by tribulations. Just trust in Christ. But to Christians he would say continue in the faith.

the challenges we face today are different from theirs. Persecution is thankfully rare in this country though all too prevalent elsewhere.

[36 : 00] No one is trying to worship us as gods but we still face opposition from some and flattery from others and we have other tribulations which possibly they didn't have to the same degree.

Discouragement for example. They lived in exciting times when people were being converted all the time. We see very few conversions.

Division also. There were quarrels in the early church but today we see the church divided into so many denominations.

And on top of that of course there are the tribulations that are common to mankind. Death, disease, disappointment. The Christian goes through all these like everyone else with the added twist perhaps that sometimes maybe we feel that our prayers are not being answered.

What a tribulation that can be. But all of these are just troubles along the way. They're like so many hurdles in a race.

[37 : 21] Tribulations are unavoidable. Indeed they're part of God's plan. Just as Jesus must suffer and die before entering his glory so we must pass through tribulations to enter the kingdom.

not that our sufferings can redeem anyone of course but they can sanctify us and they may help us to sympathize with others. Keep going then.

That's the message to them and to us. Continuing in the faith doesn't mean of course that nothing ever changes.

There are always fresh challenges to be met. if Paul had dug his heels in and simply continued in Syrian Antioch preaching to his large congregation there there would never have been a first missionary journey.

There had to be a change of direction but only one that was directed by the Lord. as individuals we often face changes in our lives but one thing must always be constant our faith in Jesus Christ that must never change.

[38 : 48] Likewise in the church it's not that nothing can ever change in the church of course not the church also learns as years go by.

As we study the scriptures together so we find that there are changes that need to be made that God requires us to make. But the faith must remain constant.

The church must continue in those good things that the Lord has taught us. one more practical task remained for Paul and Barnabas they appointed elders in every church.

In my notes here I was going to just add a few brief comments on that as a kind of afterthought but the more I thought about it the more it seems to me that that is an essential part of this message.

Why do they need elders? Why do they need leadership at all? It is so that they can continue. That is the major function of the elders to keep the church going.

[40 : 06] To encourage the believers in the church. To understand God's direction in the church. to keep leading the church forwards.

These elders here must have been very new Christians. Elsewhere Paul says that we shouldn't appoint new converts as elders. But here there was no alternative.

The church needed leaders and so Paul and Barnabas appointed leaders. No doubt consulting with the church as to who was suitable. they did so with prayer and fasting just the same as it had been at Antioch.

And then they committed them all to the Lord in whom they had believed. And that I'm sure would be their last word to us.

They would commit us to the Lord who is able to keep us and bring us safely through every trial to the glory that he has prepared for us.

[41 : 17] May the Lord indeed keep us and help us to continue. Amen.