

Persecution Benefiting the Cause of the Gospel - Acts 14:1-7

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[0 : 00] Well good morning. It is good to be back with you. My wife and I had an opportunity to go on a little vacation and spend some time away and I just want to say that I have the best wife. It was a driving tour of the Utah, the state of Utah, and the northern Arizona, places we had never been before and so I was grateful to go.

We on one particular evening had the opportunity to stay the night in our car. It may have gotten down to 14 degrees and we may have had to turn the car on several times to get through the evening and this is why one of the reasons why I have one of the best wives. We're not here to talk about that.

We're here to look at God's word together. We are in the series of the book of Acts where we are looking at this task that we have been given to be spirit empowered witnesses of Jesus Christ. Last several weeks we have looked at the the beginnings of the first missionary journey recorded in the book of Acts at Antioch the Holy Spirit informed the church while they were worshiping and fasting saying set apart for me Paul and Barnabas for the work that I have called them to. They depart Antioch and set sail and arrive at Cyprus. They gallantly preached the gospel there on that island with no response except for indifference. Indifference to the gospel. At Paphos they finally had one convert but only after a fierce battle with a magician.

With the Great Commission in mind they wanted to be witnesses to the nations and so they bravely set sail from Cyprus to and they arrived in Asia Minor modern-day Turkey to a town called Perga which was all too much for John Mark in which he at this point turns back and returns to Jerusalem which becomes a sticking point for the Apostle Paul which we will see in a few chapters later. From Perga Paul and Barnabas pushed further into the interior of Asia Minor and arrive at Pisidian Antioch and they again ministered the Word of God with great effect which in turn brings about great persecution and the persecution was so great that they were driven out of that region of Antioch and they then turned to Iconium which brings us to our text today. And despite being pushed out by persecution they depart where the text told us last week chapter 13 verse 52 the last verse in that chapter and the disciples were filled with joy and with the Holy Spirit. Having been pushed out of a town by persecution and they drove them out they they leave being filled with joy and the

Holy Spirit which brings me to the main point that I want to share today that being a faithful gospel witness requires gospel perseverance. Being a faithful gospel witness requires gospel perseverance and you say well what do you mean by gospel perseverance Scott? Well let's first learn from the author of our faith Jesus Christ. Jesus condescended to earth being born of a virgin. Jesus was tempted in all ways and yet not once did he sin. And in doing so he provided a perfect sacrifice in himself to atone for sin by dying on the cross. Prior to the cross he was betrayed by Judas, denied by Peter and abandoned by all of the disciples. He was scourged by the Romans, he was vehemently exposed to hatred by the Jewish leaders, he wore a crown of thorns, he carried his cross until he could not go any further. He was nailed to the cross and he died in order to pay a sufficient price and penalty for sin. And all who believe in his person and his work on the cross may go forgiven and may go free. And he is a great example of this gospel perseverance that I'm talking about. Great. Being a faithful gospel witness requires gospel perseverance. So that then brings us to our text today. So if you have a copy of God's word if you want to turn it to Acts chapter 14 we're going to read together one through verse seven and this will be our text for today. For this is the word of the Lord. 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 poisoning 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. 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 Derby, cities of [6 : 05] Lyconia and to the surrounding country. And there they continued to preach the gospel. Being a faithful gospel witness requires gospel perseverance. The first thing we're going to learn what does this perseverance look like is they firstly persevered in the plan. They firstly persevered in the plan. And you say how do you see the plan here in verse one? It says now at Iconium they entered together into the Jewish synagogue. The plan was their methodology. They went first into the synagogue. We see this at Cyprus and we see this at the town of Salamis. They proclaimed the word of God in the synagogue. We see this in Antioch, Pisitua. Last week they went into the synagogue. Those who go to the synagogue? Well the gospel is first for the Jew and then also for the Greek. But we also know that as Paul is very familiar with the synagogue. He is a Pharisee of Pharisees. Paul's plan and method was to go to the synagogue first. Suppose for a moment that the Lord said to us sitting here today, set apart for me and insert your name. Set apart for me, your name, for the work that I have for them in Tajikistan. Let's imagine for a moment the Lord is calling you to be a minister to a people group in the nation of Tajikistan. Let's imagine that for a moment. This is a small country that borders Afghanistan,

Uzbekistan, Kyrgyzstan, and China. What would be your plan to proclaim the gospel and to minister among them? To plant churches and to raise up leaders? What would be your plan? Before you and I would ever leave to do this, we would probably do a bit of research. We would think well who are the peoples? Who are the people groups in that nation? We would think about what is their custom and what is their culture? What brings them together? What is their language? There are many in Tajikistan. There's the Tajik and their Russian, but there's also five others that I have a hard time pronouncing so I'll spare you. But these are the predominant languages. What is their religion? They are largely Sunni Muslim, Islamic religion. Where are the existing congregations and who are those pastors? We would probably be doing some research. What peoples are least reached for the gospel in the nation of Tajikistan? We would compile all of this work together and much more and we would probably determine where to live and what we would apply for as far as a job to do and how could we be accepted and what should we do to avoid? What should we not do and to avoid?

How would I develop relationships with nationals? We would all be thinking in this way. We would inevitably do all of this, learn a language, be strategic in order to reach a people for Tajikistan. Why? Because the Great Commission informs us of our life mission. You shall be my witnesses in Jerusalem, Judea, Samaria, and to the ends of the earth. And so let's imagine for a moment the Lord is saying set apart for me you for the work I have for them and to Tajikistan.

But somehow what is obvious to us about ministering internationally somehow isn't so obvious for us here in America in Spokane with the life that the Lord has given us. It is the same life mission. It is the same mission to be his witnesses in Jerusalem, Judea, and Samaria. It would if I were to ask you what is your plan to reach your neighbors? What would be your plan? For Paul it was to go to the synagogue first. I'm going to poke around some sore spots for a moment. For what would be our plan sadly and I'm placing myself in these categories we might say what is Scott's plan for his life here in America is to be the biggest

Gonzaga basketball fan in Jerusalem and Judea and Samaria. It may sound like the biggest plan for my life is to covet what my neighbor has and to have the nicest toys and homes in Jerusalem, Judea, and Samaria. To be able to be known in Jerusalem, Judea, and Samaria as the one who has gone on the most exotic vacations nor to sleep in my car. I heard that. I heard that. You see by looking at our lives, our wants, our desires, our possessions, it may be evident to others what our life mission is. We would think deeply about going to Tajikistan, but what is our ministry and mission here in Spokane? Suppose someone from Korea was sent here as a missionary and they had your job. They lived in your neighborhood. They married someone into your family and so now they're ministering to your family. What would be their plan to minister there from

[12 : 00] South Korea? They're coming to America. They're one of your colleagues. They work in the same place. They live in your neighborhood. They married into your family and their ministry is now theirs. They would probably think deeply what it is, what is the plan to make disciples of those

in Spokane? And when I think about what would be their plan, I don't have to think very far because I think, well that should be our plan. That should be your plan. That should be my plan. I have my job for a reason. I have my family for a reason. I have these children to make discipleship begins in the home. I have my neighborhood. For Wendy and I, we have neighbors. We have dinners with our neighbors who do not know the Lord. This is part of our plan to be witnesses of Jesus Christ in our neighborhood. In addition, we have talked about hosting a neighborhood gathering this summer with our neighbors to invite our neighbors so they have opportunity to get to know one another, but also it's part of our testimony of who we are and what we stand for. This is the prevailing mission of our lives to be witnesses and to make disciples. Paul and Barnabas often would go to the synagogue. This was the place where they stirred up dissension. This is also though the place that was stirred up in dissension. So Paul, Paul and

Barnabas, their strategic plan was to in part go to the synagogue. Secondly, we also see that part of the plan for them, they persevered in the plan and the part of the plan is their character. Look with me in verse 52 again. It's amazing to me after verse, I'm sorry, 13 verse 50. They were driven out of Antioch by persecution and then they were filled with joy and the Holy Spirit. And then it says in chapter 14, our first verse of our message today. Now at Iconium they entered together, Jewish synagogue, and they spoke in such a way where a great number of both Jews and Greeks believed. They spoke in such a way.

Part of the plan was related to their character. Their fruitfulness was related to their character. After being persecuted, they were filled with joy and they were filled with the Holy Spirit. As if they were saying, Lord, thank you for finding me worthy to suffer for your namesake. Would that have been your response? How did Paul and Barnabas speak in such a way to the citizens who responded so winsomely to the gospel? Well, it says that they were filled with the Holy Spirit. They had the character of one who found the Lord found easy to utilize for his purposes. They had prepared themselves to study God's word and so the Holy Spirit could recall to their minds the things that they knew and had learned to speak. Do we have a grasp of God's word and the character that the Lord finds it easy to use us and a grasp of God's word that he can recall to our minds to speak? They had a plan. They had a plan in their methodology.

They went to the synagogue and they had a plan and they had purposed in their character to be someone who the Lord would find easy to utilize. They were filled with the Holy Spirit and God used the word of God that they had committed to memory. They persevered in the plan. Secondly, we see that they persevered in persecution. Paul and Barnabas are met with immediate success and immediate opposition. Notice in the opposition in verse 2, but the unbelieving Jews stirred up the Gentiles poisoning their minds against the brothers. They were met with immediate opposition. Notice the rebellious response. The rebellious response comes first. Paul and Barnabas encountered these unbelieving Jews in Iconium. The word unbelieving can carry with the connotation of disobedient. The word means to be unwilling to be persuaded. To not believe is a rebellious respond to God. We learn in Romans that those are outside of Christ. They suppress the truth and unrighteousness. We read in Romans this, verses chapter 1 verses 19 and 20, for what can be known about God is made plain to them. This is through general revelation through creation. For what can be known about God is made plain to them because God has shown it to them. For his invisible attributes, namely his eternal power and divine nature, have been perceived even since the creation of the world and the things that have been made. So they are without excuse. What can we see in creation? What can those without Christ know about God, his eternal power and his divine nature? That's what general revelation does. And so they, here's what people know and please also what is disruptive to me is to see the folks in the synagogue, mainly the Jews. It says in verse 2, the sad category, it says in verse 2, the unbelieving Jews stirred up this dissension. The people who should have known the most. They grew up in the synagogue. They studied the Old Testament. They knew what God had said. They had general revelation. They knew God, but they refused to believe when the gospel was presented. They refused to believe in Jesus. So it's not just that they're unbelieving. They're disobedient toward the Lord. And we can take this to heart. Not all will be persuaded to believe to those who we share Christ with. The unbelieving Jews, they not only rejected the message, they stir up and they poison the minds of Gentiles. The opponents were engaged in anti-evangelism, if you will, using the tools of slander and false teaching. Tension and aniconium is clearly rising. Second, we see a remarkable response. Look with me in verse 3. How did Paul and Barnabas respond? So they remained for a long time, speaking boldly for the

Lord. This remarkable response. In preparing for this message and studying for the sermon, I was, I laughed out loud as I was preparing for this message, because there was a word that kind of surprised me in its placement. And it's the two-letter word that begins with verse 3, so. So. It means for this reason or therefore. And so let's try to understand why this verse I found so humorous. I would like to read the verse that said this. So they have this extreme opposition. The Jews are stirring up the

[19:50] Gentiles. They're poisoning their minds and against the brothers, Paul and Barnabas and the others who have now come to believe. And so I would like to say that my verse, if I was writing the Bible, I would have said, so they left town and went to the next. And because of the opposition, that's how I would have wrote that verse. But no, the verse says so, they remained for a long time. They remained for a long time. I wanted to write my sermon manuscript and to say that despite the opposition, they remained. That's what I was tempted to write. But because the word so is there, it's because of the opposition. They remained in a Iconium. And why? They were motivated perhaps by these infant believers who had just come to faith in Christ. And they saw the opposition and they said, these believers need to be rooted in faith. And so let's stay here because there's opposition, not despite the opposition because instead of being intimidated, they were inspired to even a bolder witness. They stay for several months. Paul and Barnabas were confident they should stay. They should stay put and continue to preach boldly. Why? Being a faithful gospel witness requires gospel perseverance. Next, I find another remarkable revelation in verse 3. Look what the Lord does in His kindness to substantiate Paul and Barnabas' witness, the words they speak. So let me read from the top of the verse. So they remained for a long time speaking boldly the word of the Lord, who, that is the

Lord, bore witness to the word of His grace, granting signs and wonders to be done by their hands. Notice their roles. Paul and Barnabas spoke boldly for the Lord. They were bearing witness of Jesus Christ. They were proclaiming the gospel.

They were being His witness. That was their job. God is granting signs and wonders, miracles to be done through the hands of Paul and Barnabas, and God is the one who is bearing witness to the word of grace through the miracles. God is validating the message of Paul and Barnabas being accompanied with miracles.

It is God who saves. Isn't that good to know? Isn't that good to know that God is the one who is bearers witness to His grace as we proclaim? It's God who saves.

He's the one who's bearing witness to the words of grace. That's so comforting to me. I don't have to convince somebody to believe. That's God's job to give someone the faith to believe in His name. That's liberating for us who are witnesses of Jesus Christ. As a side note, what produced such hatred and hostility? The message of grace. God's unmerited, unmerited kindness, unmerited favor. That was what was such a thing that stirred up hatred and hostility. And why is that? Because grace tends to either give people unspeakable relief and joy, and grace also produces hostility and anger. Why? It's the default mode of our hearts to have works-based righteousness. It's why we generally either embrace grace or we oppose it. This is why we observe with so many world religions having the form of works-based righteousness. Last week I just shared we were on vacation and we had the opportunity to take a flight home which we made. Though I know enough about airlines that I don't fly enough, but if I had enough frequent flyer miles, I could have maybe caught an earlier flight. So I could have been put on the standby list and based on my frequent flyer miles, they may have said, oh yeah, you're a valued customer. Why don't we put you at the top of the standby list? And so if a seat comes available at an earlier flight, we would love to make room for you and you could go on for free. But others who don't have as many frequent flyer miles such as myself perhaps may have to charge a little money to be on the standby list, but you may not be bumped up as high or you'd have to pay a little fee to have your flight be transferred a little bit. But aren't you glad the gospel doesn't work like that? We don't have to earn enough moral points with

[25:18] God to pay a certain price for wrongs done before gaining access into this kingdom. Through Christ, He offers salvation. Praise God that through Jesus we have access to God by grace, through faith, apart from works. This scandalous message of grace enrages the self-righteous legalists and so it did in Iconium. Lastly, I want us to look at being a faithful gospel witness requires gospel perseverance. They persevered in their purpose. Verse 4, but the people in the city were divided. Some sided with the Jews and some with the apostles and when an attempt was made by the Gentiles and the Jews, they with their rulers to mistreat them and to stone them.

They learned of it and fled to Lystra and Derby and cities of Iconia and to the surrounding country and there they continued to preach the gospel. They persevered in their purpose. I find this so remarkable. The division had moved from the synagogue into the whole entire city. Look with me in verse 4, but the people of the city were divided. I thought this was an internal argument in the synagogue. No, no, no. It had now spilled over out of the synagogue. The whole city was now enraged and caught up in this debate. Some sided with the Jews and some with the apostles, meaning the Jews were on the wrong side of this. The Jews have a supposed advantage. They know the Old

Testament scriptures. They know the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. They anticipated a Messiah. They heard of the Messiah Jesus, but they rejected Him and the Gentiles don't have this advantage and it saddens me that the Jews in verse 4 were the ones who were on the wrong side of this issue. The schism was not just verbal anymore. They were not just verbally arguing over the truth. Now it turns violent and there exists a violent attempt to assault and stone them to death verse 5 and when the attempt was made by the Gentiles and the Jews with their rulers to mistreat them and to stone them to stone them to death. So they not only persevered, but they were also prudent and so they fled. They learned of it verse 6 and they fled to Lystra and Derby, cities of Lyconia and their surrounding. Lystra, you can see on the map behind me, we start in Antioch which starts the orange, goes to Iconia which ends in orange and starts the green. The green goes down to Lystra and then that's 20 miles south of Iconia and you go another 60 miles you'll end up in Derby. I recognize that's hard to see. But and they were ministering also in the surrounding countryside as they went. If you remember what was my last point, they persevered in their purpose. What was the purpose? Verse 7 and there they continued to preach the gospel. That's the purpose to be a witness of Jesus Christ. So the being a faithful gospel witness requires gospel perseverance. This text from verses from 1 through 7 provides an opportunity for us to pause and spend a little time considering some questions. When one is experiencing persecution, when should one stay and when should one flee? Paul and Barnabas have both responses in this same text. Earlier, remember the word so, because of persecution they remained. They stayed because of persecution. Then later in the text they flee because of persecution. When is it appropriate for a missionary or one of us to stay and or flee? And so questions can rise to the surface. Are Paul and Barnabas being inconsistent? They remain. They flee. Worse yet, are Paul and Barnabas have they lost their faith? Are they guilty of unbelief and not trusting God? Why are they fleeing? This is one of the difficult questions that Christians face on the mission field and hostile lands faced throughout church history. To what links can we go or should we go to avoid persecution or death? Can we press charges or go to court or claim our rights? Paul was claimed to be a Roman citizen. When is it cowardly for us to go? When is it the right thing to stay?

Stephen was martyred. Shouldn't we all just be willing to die? Why did Paul and Barnabas stay for a long time in Iconium in verse 3 and then flee to Lister and Derby in verse 6? When does one remain under persecution and when should one seek refuge? I think John Calvin who wrote in the 1500s, he's a French reformer. He provides a helpful perspective. Let me read from John Calvin here for one moment and I'm going to place emphasis when I read his words.

And though Paul and Barnabas flee, lest they throw themselves headlong into death, yet their constancy in preaching the gospel does sufficiently to declare that they feared not danger. For God, for Luke says that they preached the gospel in other places also. That is the right kind of fear. When the servants of Christ do not run willfully into the hands of their enemies of them to be murdered and yet do not abandon their duty, neither does fear hinder them from obeying what God has called them to. And so consequently they can afford if need be to go even though death itself to go through death itself to their duty. But I like the line of that John Calvin says that yet their constancy in preaching the gospel. So how is that helpful? In other words we have to pursue the course of action that we think is best for the cause of the gospel. Of course this biblical principle does not make our decisions easy ones. It can be hard to discern when the cause of the gospel is best advanced by living to preach another day and when like Stephen we might be called to give our finest sermon and then face certain death. But it seems like Paul and Barnabas may have reasoned something like this. If we have people who hate us fine, if folks are getting agitated and stirred up so be it. All the more reason to stay this place needs the Word of God. But to die by a secret plot here in Iconium does not seem best for the mission of God has given us. We have been here for a while.

We have other cities to see. Let's keep preaching the gospel elsewhere and maybe we can come back later when things have cooled down. That seems to be the sentiment. They made their decision not to not in a version to risk but in an effort to fulfill their duties to proclaim the gospel. It seems that Paul didn't forget this and it seems that in writing to Timothy he hints at this. In 2 Timothy I'm going to conclude with this thought. It says this, Paul is writing to Timothy who he will meet in Lystra. Lystra is Timothy's hometown. So next week's sermon will go to Lystra which is where Timothy will be found. Perhaps Timothy believes the gospel himself during this first missionary journey because on the second missionary journey Paul will pick up Timothy and he will join him in his missionary journey. I say that to mention what Paul writing to

[34 : 05] Timothy refers. Remember being a faithful gospel witness requires gospel perseverance and we read in 2 Timothy what Paul later wrote to Timothy. You however have found my teaching, my conduct, my aim in life, my faith, my patience, my love, my steadfastness, my persecutions and suffering, what happened to me in Antioch at Iconium and at Lystra which persecutions I endured yet from them all the Lord has rescued me indeed all who desire to live a godly life in Christ Jesus will be persecuted. Being a faithful gospel witness requires gospel perseverance. As you think about hardships you may face as a Christian in your school and your business in your neighborhood you have to ask yourself and pray through the question how can I best serve the cause of the gospel. Sometimes it's by moving on to the next thing oftentimes it's remaining in a hard situation. Paul and Barnabas persevered and endured in their purpose of proclaiming the gospel and so ought we.

Would you pray with me? Lord thank you for this example that Paul and Barnabas set in being a faithful gospel witness and having gospel perseverance. Lord thank you that you persevered all the way through the cross for us to know you to have sin forgiven. Thank you for your shed blood on our behalf. Lord I pray that no matter what circumstances we find ourselves in and what neighborhood Lord I pray that we would have that missionary mindset as if we went to Chajikistan. What would we do? Lord I pray that we would have that same mindset here in our neighborhood in our families in our workplace in this city of

Spokane. What would we do? What ought we to be doing? Lord I thank you for the greatest privilege to declare that which we know to be true about your son Jesus Christ both his person who he is the God man Jesus Christ and what he has done and dying on the cross raising on the third day to forgive sin. We love you Lord thank you that we get to testify to that and be a faithful gospel witness.

Thank you for the reminder this morning of our responsibility. We love you Lord. Amen.