

Tribulations and the Kingdom of God

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[0 : 00] The text for us this morning as we do hear from the living God and his word is Acts the 14th chapter. Let me say that I am delighted to be with you in the coming weeks and months as we journey with Paul and the early church, as we race with Paul and the early church through the rest of the book of Acts.

If you haven't been with us, Acts is a book about the birth of the church and its expansion. From Jerusalem to Rome as it's led by the Spirit of God. And the Lord has now begun to reach the Gentile world in the story.

And you'll recall that he's established a beachhead church in Syrian Antioch. And there the church staff included Paul and Barnabas. And the Spirit of God said in verse 2 of chapter 13, Set apart for me Barnabas and Saul for the work to which I have called them.

So they took off to the west and they sailed to Cyprus. And then they continued beyond Cyprus up into the region known as Galatia. And last week we saw they came to Pisidian Antioch.

A different Antioch. Second Antioch. And there they preached the gospel. And the Jews of that city stirred up persecution and drove them out. But not to worry, verse 52 of chapter 13 says, They were filled with joy and with the Holy Spirit.

[1 : 30] And now what we have in chapter 14 is the continuation and the completion of this first missionary journey. And we pick things up as Paul and Barnabas have come to the city of Iconium.

Now you can have a look at the two maps on your service sheet as you go and follow along there. They're a bit small. They're a little fuzzy. But I think they'll still work for most of you to be able to read them.

The map on the left shows the beginning verses of Acts as Paul and Barnabas moved inward into Asia Minor. And the map on the right is the end of the chapter where they make the return voyage back through and around, sailing on the Mediterranean back to Antioch.

So you can have this out with the maps on the front. There's space on the back to jot down notes if you wish to do so as we go along. And if you can manage it, have your Bibles out too. Because we're beginning in verse 1.

Let me say by way of final introduction that it's a challenge to preach from these missionary journeys. Because on the surface you could just sort of give a lecture on the sequence of events. But Luke has not given us a simple log book of Paul's journeys.

[2 : 42] Luke tells these stories inspired by the Holy Spirit with marvelous detail, and I think detail, that's meant for us to see in this account the example of Paul and Barnabas.

So we're going to take chapter 14 in three sections and ask the question, how do we as a church and in our own lives have a Christian witness in the world?

What qualities do we see in Paul and Barnabas that would be applicable to us? I have six. Six qualities in Acts 14.

So listen for the six as they come out as we go. We begin verses 1 to 7 in Iconium. Eighty miles southeast of Pisidian Antioch, a city on a high plateau overlooking the plains.

And here I find two qualities that leap out at me. You ready? Two qualities. The first is that Paul and Barnabas were spirit-filled. And the second is they were bold.

[3 : 45] Verse 1. Now at Iconium they entered together in the Jewish synagogue and so spoke that a great company believed, both of Jews and of Greeks. One little word in that verse stands out to me.

The other words are good, but one little word stands out to me. It's the tiny word, so. Luke says they so spoke that a multitude believed.

I mean there's speaking and then there's so speaking. And Paul and Barnabas were so speaking. And you say, what's that all about? Well, at least here you could say that they're speaking in a way that is energized by the Holy Spirit.

Again, verse 52 of chapter 13 says they were filled with the Holy Spirit and the next thing we see is that they're so speaking in Iconium that many believe. Now no doubt the content was rich, it was informed, it was incisive, but I think the point is that people believe and respond when we speak and when we minister in the energy of the Holy Spirit.

Some translations say they spoke with such power that a great number believed. Well, that kind of transformative power in our witness comes from the Holy Spirit.

[5 : 00] It doesn't mean you have to be a great preacher like Paul. But it does mean that you seek to be energized by the Spirit as you minister the Gospel in your context, however the Lord's equipped you and whatever He's prepared you to do because you recognize that the power at work is the Spirit's.

Now Iconium was a fair-sized city and they went before the synagogue, the same pattern we've seen before, to the Jews first. And it's a great beginning and many people believe and then immediately trouble starts.

And no doubt they knew this because it's exactly what had just happened in Antioch. It starts in verse 2. But the unbelieving Jews stirred up the Gentiles and poisoned their minds against the brethren.

The language here seems to imply that the opposition was underground. It was smoldering. It was just slowly boiling as they led the Gentiles to evil.

And it took a while for it all to come to a head. So, verse 3, they remained for a long time speaking boldly for the Lord. A long time probably implies several months.

[6 : 14] They remained. They continued to preach and to teach, speaking boldly for the Lord. And of course, I'm picking up on that key word, boldly. We've seen so much boldness in the book of Acts, we're almost overwhelmed by it.

But here it is again. And it's repeated again and again, I think, in Acts because it's basic to the church and our Christian witness. Now think about this.

Paul and Barnabas knew resentment was brewing. They knew the unbelievers were poisoning the atmosphere. And so you know what my favorite word is in verse 3?

It's so. Only this time, it means still or therefore. Now do you follow that thought? This is important. So, things are going to get bad for Paul and Barnabas. And they know it. And they say, Therefore, let's stay for a long time and speak boldly.

[7 : 16] I love that it doesn't say, in spite of the fact that things were getting hard, Paul and Barnabas stayed anyway. Not the way it works. When the battle gets hot, it means someone's going to win.

And Paul and Barnabas aren't leaving. Now do you think that way? When you say or you do something that brings the gospel of Jesus Christ to people and someone puts you down, or someone confronts you, or someone mocks you, what happens inside of you?

Is that occasion for an increase in your boldness? Or just the opposite? Does it? This is a quality that really makes a difference in the Christian life. And let me put it strongly.

I think we will not accomplish anything for God in the long run without boldness. Because the moment you stand out for the gospel, even if there's a positive reception, the devil takes notice. And you're going to be resisted. So boldness is what you need. And it doesn't mean you become some terribly offensive person, or you shout people down all the time, or you shove the gospel down their throats.

[8 : 30] But it does mean that nobody stops you in the ministry that you've been called to by the Spirit of God. And you remember chapter 4, when they hauled Peter and John to the Sanhedrin, and they said, no more preaching about Jesus.

We've had it. And what did Peter say? We must speak that which we have seen and heard, he says. And then they're praying afterwards, and they say this, they say, now Lord, look upon their threats, and grant to your servants to continue to speak the word with all boldness.

Well, the longer they stayed in Iconium, the tougher it got. Look at verse 3, the end of verse 3, it says, the Lord bore witness to the word of His grace. They boldly continue, and they so speak, but it's the Lord who bears the witness.

And the city really begins to polarize now, split down the middle, and that's no surprise, right? That when the claims of Jesus Christ are laid upon women and men, they divide them. And that's why you need boldness.

The whole thing blows up. Verse 5, an attempt was made to molest them, just means to assault them, and to stone them. A mob took off through the town toward Paul and Barnabas, and they're out to kill.

[10:00] And Paul and Barnabas find out about it, and they know they've got to get out of there. And it's not because they're suddenly not bold. It's just that sometimes the Spirit says, I want you bold, but I want you alive.

So they flee. Verse 6, they fled to Lystra and Derbe, cities of Lyconia, to the surrounding country. Still pretty bold, because they only go 20 miles away to Lystra.

They probably should have gone further, as it turns out, in a little bit. But they go, and guess what they did? Verse 7, there they preached the gospel. Right back at it.

Incidentally, though, Lystra isn't very far away from Iconium. They're really moving out, away from civilization at this point. These provincial towns of Asia Minor were in barren country, very rustic, rural places, market towns.

And the further these guys went into the country of Asia Minor, the greater the dangers, and the further out they are from any kind of civilized place. But the Spirit's leading them on, and so there's work to be done in Lystra and Derbe.

[11:12] And so in verses 8 through 20, Luke records the ministry at Lystra. This is the part Eric said you need to listen to. It's a strange story in some ways, and there's two more qualities that come at me here from the Lystra episode.

So these are qualities 3 and 4. Number 3 is that Paul and Barnabas were humble. Humble. And then number 4 is they were persistent.

So they were spirit-filled and they were bold. And now we'll see they're humble and they're persistent. Let's get into the story. Interestingly, there's no mention of a synagogue at Lystra. Likely because there wasn't one. So they're preaching. Probably in the marketplace, verse 8 says, there's a man sitting who could not use his feet, a cripple from birth. Verse 9, he listened to Paul speaking.

This man listened to what Paul was saying as he went on proclaiming the good news. And God was at work in this cripple. Luke says as Paul was preaching, he was looking intently at him.

[12:19] I thought maybe I should try that this week. Just pick one of you and keep staring at you the whole sermon. See what might happen in the context of the sermon.

Well, it seems the Spirit of God had drawn Paul right to this man. And with good reason because this man is believing what he hears. Verse 9 says, Paul's seeing that he has faith to be made well. Literally, that he had faith for saving. This man had faith to be saved. So the Spirit of God revealed to Paul that this man was believing. And I think Paul saw here an opportunity in the power of God to confirm his message.

So verse 10, he says in a loud voice, stand upright on your feet. to a man who's never stood upright in his life.

And the people had to be looking at this and thinking, is Paul crazy? But not this man. I love this, Luke says, and he sprang up and walked.

[13:27] Sprang first, walked second. for someone who's never been on his feet before. The Spirit had so prepared him and so prepared Paul that when the two came together, he just shot up.

And I think that besides just obviously caring about the man's condition, Paul intended for this to be a sign. Just like the signs mentioned in verse 3 up above. To witness to the words that he spoke.

And it worked, I guess. But not in the way Paul expected it to work. The people in Lystra, could tell there was something supernatural at work here. They just thought Paul was it.

Verse 11, when the crowd saw what Paul had done, they lifted up their voices. One great big yell of acclamation. Saying in Lyconian, Luke adds that little detail.

Lyconian would have been the local dialect, not the Greek language that Paul was speaking.

Meaning Paul and Barnabas didn't understand a word of this. What's coming next? It's important to know that.

[14:32] But Luke translates it for us. The crowd is in a frenzy and they exclaim the gods have come down to us in the likeness of men. Well, a little historical info needed here.

A little pause. You have to understand what's behind this. It's fascinating. The Bible doesn't just come along and make these things up. There was a legend around Lystra at the time. We know about it through other ancient texts, other Greek writers.

There's a legend, actually a morality tale, that told of the Greek gods Zeus and Hermes arriving on earth and visiting Lystra. And they asked for a place to stay.

And everybody in the town refused them except this one old couple who lived outside the city. And so the story goes that Zeus and Hermes were so angry at this town that later they just wipe out the whole city.

So, here come these two guys and they pull off this miracle and this crowd of largely uneducated, simple-minded folk in rural Lystra say, uh-oh, Zeus and Hermes are back.

[15:40] We're not going to blow it this time. So they call Barnabas Zeus. They call Paul Hermes. Which I think means Barnabas must have been a pretty impressive fellow to be thought of as Zeus.

And these guys have no idea what's happening and the priest of Zeus comes and offers sacrifices to them. And once Paul and Barnabas finally sort out what's going on, they find themselves now facing a very different sort of temptation than the situation in Iconium.

because I think Paul could have turned to Barnabas and said, you know, Barn, at this, we could just really capitalize on this.

I mean, we could be really something here and really get these people's attention and then give them the gospel. The town before, people wanted to kill them.

This town, they want to make them gods. If persecution doesn't get to you, well then, pride may just do it. And pride is far worse.

[16:49] Paul and Barnabas know you don't need to be popular in the world to be successful with God. That the Spirit does what he wants through the vessels he has by the way they're gifted, not on the basis of the world's approval.

So their response is wonderful. Verse 14, but when they heard of it, they tore their garments and rushed out among the multitude saying, men, why are you doing this? They didn't want anything to do with it.

They didn't want the fame and they saw it as blasphemy. That's why they tore their garments. And here's the point. Paul and Barnabas are honest men. Humble and true men.

Maybe it should be honest instead of humble as the quality. Because a false teacher wants to be exalted. Jesus told us that. Gospel of John 7, 18.

Jesus said, the one who speaks on his own authority seeks his own glory. But the one who seeks the glory of him who sent him is true. And in him there is no falsehood.

[17:50] So just watch how quickly Paul takes this and turns the whole thing around. Verse 15, we also are men of like nature with you and bring you good news that you should turn from these vain things to a living God.

He calls their worship idolatrous vanity. dead. Powerless. And he takes their sense that the supernatural is present and he points them to the living God.

He doesn't say the God of Abraham and Isaac and Jacob. These aren't Jews. He says, the God who made heaven and earth and the sea and all things that are in them. And you say, well that's a little vague, Paul.

No. No. No. No it wasn't. Not in a world where people lived with multiple gods and goddesses who were ready to do favors or to lash out at them eager to be placated by just the right religious formula and ceremony.

Paul says, the living God made the whole lot. So he's the one responsible for everything good. Now Paul had already been preaching for a while before this, right?

[18:57] The crippled man had been hearing him. I'm sure he'd spoken of Jesus. But here he begins at the beginning. Basic monotheism. A living God who created the universe and to whom all are accountable.

Paul and Barnabas were humble. They turned people away from themselves to the living God.

They're also persistent. This is number four. Pick it up in verse 19. The persecution from Antioch and Iconium had followed them to Lystra.

Jews from those cities came and having persuaded the people they stoned Paul and dragged him out of the city to dispose of his body. You see how fickle that crowd was?

They just turned on them. Praised them as gods then pound them with rocks into the ground. Watch out for the praise of men.

Well, verse 20. The disciples gathered around him. Now, can I just pause to insert one detail here? I think it's worth it. Luke says disciples in the plural.

[20 : 03] How many went in to Lystra? Two. Paul and Barnabas. Where'd the disciples come from? Well, fruitful ministry.

That in the time in Lystra before all this happened, Paul had been preaching. And you know, furthermore, who three of them probably were? Can't prove this, but I think three of them? Acts 16, verse 1 says, Timothy was from Lystra.

And from 2 Timothy, we know that his mother and his grandmother, Lois and Eunice, were also believers. So I think it's likely that around Paul here is this family with Timothy.

And if that's the case, what wonderful fruit this is. Here in this little town, in the middle of the barren land, comes Timothy, the great friend of Paul and source of strength for the church.

Well, Luke's so straightforward about this, but they're about to see something unbelievable. Verse 20, Paul rose up. Now, was that a miracle? Well, I think so.

[21 : 10] I don't have any other way to explain that to you. And then look at the next statement. He rose up and entered the city. Entered the city?

This is persistence. He's not finished yet. So Luke's very happy to report that this slight interruption only delayed Paul a matter of a few hours, apparently.

And then Luke records on the next day he went with Barnabas to Derbe. It's a 30-mile hike to Derbe. They started out the next day. Persistence. What did they do there?

Verse 21, they preached the gospel to that city and made many disciples. Paul had been called to do this task and so the work goes on.

Now, Derbe is the first city where they didn't start a riot, so maybe it was somewhat relaxing in Derbe for them. I don't know. But he goes on and there's something wonderful there.

[22 : 11] I'm not advocating you learn to run yourself into the ground all the time. Even Paul gets his rest at the end of the chapter. He's back home in Antioch. It says he stays for no little time, probably almost a year.

He just stays put after all this is over. But there are those times when you're doing what the Lord has called you to do and you must persist in the doing of it so that when you sign up for a new work for Christ and after a few weeks maybe something's going wrong and times are hard and you just want to quit.

Well, if God has you somewhere doing something then you persist. We have two more qualities to go here. Derbe was the last stop and from Derbe, of course, the best way home would be to go east through Tarsus and over into northern Syria.

Safest, quickest, home in a hurry. And that's exactly the opposite of what Paul and Barnabas do. Look at verse 21. Now you can trace this on the second map if you want.

After being in Derbe, Luke says they returned to Lystra and to Iconium and to Antioch. That's Pisidian Antioch from chapter 13. Why are they going back?

[23 : 25] What are they doing? Luke tells us, verse 22, strengthening the souls of the disciples, exhorting them to continue in the faith, saying that through many tribulations we must enter the kingdom of God.

Don't miss this point. Paul and Barnabas risked their lives to follow up these believers. You say, what do you mean? They went back to the cities where they were run out and stoned.

Mob violence is ready for them in these towns. This is the quality of follow through. That's my fifth quality. They follow through on their commitments, what they started.

They go back to every town. Because the Great Commission isn't to go around and get these rapid faith commitments from people. It is to make disciples. And as dangerous as it was to themselves to go back to these towns, they must have thought it was more dangerous to leave these new believers alone.

Marvelous. And I'm just going to list for you what's there in that follow up. This could be a full sermon on its own here. But what's involved in that follow up?

[24 : 36] Just look at it. Number one, they strengthened the disciples. They propped them up. They encouraged their resolve. They fed them. They taught them. That's one. Number two, they exhorted them, he says.

They pushed them toward a certain kind of life. 1 Thessalonians, Paul says, like a father with his children, we exhorted each one of you to walk in a manner worthy of God.

I think it's the same kind of exhortation in mind here. He urges them to continue in the faith. You're only a Christian if you continue. And the thing that will usually or often or maybe most cause us to stop and question our faith is suffering.

So Paul spells it out in verse 22. He says, through many tribulations we must enter the kingdom of God. You want to enter the kingdom? It's through tribulations. No other way. And these believers needed to know this now because by aligning themselves with the kingdom of God they'd aligned themselves against the forces that drove Paul out of these towns and the kingdom of this world and the devil who rules it.

Well, they encourage, they exhort, they organize them as a church. You see that? Verse 23, they appointed elders for them in every church. These believers needed to go forward as a church with leaders who would carry on the work of the gospel and feed the flock.

[25 : 59] And then finally they committed them all to God. It's there, verse 23, with prayer and fasting they committed them to the Lord in whom they believed. They recognized that God's the one running the show. We have to seek Him and so we step back and say, you are the Lord's.

You're in His hands. It's His church. He'll look after it. He'll follow through. And that wasn't the end of it either because once Paul gets back home at the end of chapter 14, there's a dispute about this but many scholars believe, and I am of the opinion, that this is where Paul writes his letter to the Galatians.

Who are the Galatians? They're just the believers in this whole area of Galatia that he's now been through twice. So, maybe pencil into your Bibles at the end of chapter 14. Paul writes Galatians. It's between 14 and 15. Don't write that in the few Bibles. It's just your Bible. Paul writes Galatians. Problems would come up in those churches and he needs to address those problems.

He's not done with these folks. Follow through. Well, Paul and Barnabas all together were likely 18 months to 2 years on this journey.

[27 : 14] 18 months to 2 years. We just did it in 2 weeks but they took 2 years. Here's the closer. You can watch on your map verse 24. Then they passed through Pisidia and came to Pamphylia and when they had spoken the word in Perga 18 miles from the port and they cannot stop they go down to Italia and from there they sail to Antioch where they had been commended to the grace of God for the work which they had fulfilled.

Now picture this. Paul and Barnabas sailing on the Mediterranean back to Antioch. This wonderful church that had given them to the Holy Spirit and sent them out some 2 years ago and for all they knew Paul and Barnabas are dead.

I know there's no Twitter updates to track the progress of the first missionary journey. Right? And here they are. Worse for wear no doubt.

Been through so much. So many stories. So many times almost dead. Sailing through rough terrain. All kinds of dangers. I'm sure much more than Luke even records here. Often tired.

Often hurting. Often alone. And Paul and Barnabas come over those hills into Antioch. And can you imagine the joy of that church?

[28 : 36] So what happens? Well of course they threw them a great big banquet to celebrate all their marvelous achievements and maybe gave them a plaque that said to Paul and Barnabas for extraordinary work on your first missionary journey.

Congratulations. No. No. Nothing of the sort. Verse 27. When they arrived they gathered the church together and declared all that God had done.

with them. And how he had opened the door of faith to the Gentiles. All that God had done with them. Paul and Barnabas were his chosen instruments.

He was the one who began the spread of the gospel to the world. And do you know what it means to declare what God has done? It means to praise God. And that's quality number six. that in all we do for Christ we praise God because he's the one doing these things with us.

Now they were sure involved. Luke says they fulfilled the work. Took a lot of effort on their part. But in the final analysis the praise goes to God who worked through them.

[29 : 52] That's the list. Spirit filled, bold, humble, persistent workers who care about follow through and all along and at the end of the day praise God.

Well God grant that those things would describe our lives and our life as a church. In the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Amen. Let us pray.

There will be moments of silence between the spoken prayers when you may add your own intercessions in the quietness of your heart. Heavenly Father, you, the all-powerful one, the holy one, who has loved us from the beginning, who has sought us out and desired to know us, and sent his own dear son to die for us, and to take our sin upon himself.

thank you. Thank you for your many mercies to us each day. Thank you for the forgiveness we know through the cross of Jesus.

And thank you for the promise of eternal life with you. And thank you, Father, for the example of Paul and Barnabas, who went out in obedience to your call to bring the good news of the gospel to an often hostile and pagan culture.

[31 : 28] We pray that you would so touch our hearts with your Holy Spirit, so grow us in our love for you, in gratitude to you, that in boldness and humility, in honesty and persistence, we would be willing to be used by you for the furtherance of your kingdom.

Again, Father, we bring to you the people of Haiti, thinking of the many who suffer right now in the aftermath of the huge earthquake this past week.

we pray for those in this island nation and elsewhere who have lost loved ones as a result of this tragedy. May they know your precious comfort, healing, and protection in their sorrow and desolation.

We pray most earnestly for a coordinated relief effort to help those who are injured, those without food and water, and those without shelter or sanitation.

Father, quickly bring to these people all that they need. Heavenly Father, we lift up to you Christians all over the world who suffer for their faith, those who are imprisoned or sometimes lose their lives, and others increasingly in the West who are persecuted in less obvious ways, perhaps losing a job or being ostracized in their communities when they stand for the truth of the Bible and for Jesus.

[33 : 28] Father, we ask for your courage and protection for all these brothers and sisters who boldly speak of you in word and deed. We thank you for them and ask that you would continue to sustain them, give them your joy, and cover them by your Holy Spirit during their tribulations.

We also remember at this time our missionaries working overseas. Sharon Thompson with Wycliffe Bible Translators in Burkina Faso, West Africa, Doug and Anna Maria Graham in Asia, and Brian McConaghy with Ratnap Foundation for Cambodia.

And here in Canada we remember Catherine Gwinnett with the North American Indigenous Ministries in Campbell River. Father, we pray that you would care for these ones, that you would protect them and supply their every need.

Heavenly Father, with the discernment process coming to an end and the time fast approaching when we as a church must make a decision about whether to leave our buildings or stay and maintain our appeal.

We continue to uphold our clergy, our trustees, and church committee as they lead and guide us. May they each find their strength in you, Lord God, and experience your protection for themselves and their families.

[35 : 18] We also remember the other churches who are involved in this discernment process, their clergy and people. Keep us all united, listening to the Holy Spirit and loving one another.

Help us to remember that you are in all the circumstances that lie ahead. Lord, give us hearts of gratitude and peace so that we may honor you in all that we say and do.

and now, Father, we take a few moments to pray for those in our church family who are ill.

We lift up to you Harold, Yvette, Jean, Rosemary, and Marguerite. We thank you for your love and care for each one and pray that they might know your great mercy and healing touch this day.

And we do ask that you will continue your work of healing and restoration in the life of our rector, David Short. Lastly, we bring to you perhaps a concern or a thanksgiving that may be on our hearts this day.

[36 : 57] All these prayers we offer in the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Amen.