

The Open Window

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Date: 03 April 2005

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[0 : 00] Our Lord Jesus Christ, we pray that you would now be with us in your risen power. We ask that you yourself would teach us that our hearts may be set aflame by what you say, that you might possess us in faith, hope and love, so that through many tribulations we may enter the kingdom of heaven.

In your name we pray. Amen. Well, I wonder if you would take your Bible out and turn to the passage Audrey read to us in Acts 14, page 126.

One of the most action-packed passages in the Bible. Too much to bite off and chew in one sermon, I'm sorry. And while you're doing that, I want you also to keep your finger in Acts 14 and turn back to the maps at the back of the Bible.

Now, the back of the Bible, these pictures, charts, they're a very important part of the Bible, don't you think? I've spent many a happy hour learning the miscellaneous objects.

Actually, I should tell you that if you come across a dull sermon, one of the most interesting parts in the back of the Bible is the time chart. So if you want to know where Isaiah happened and what kings he was looking at, that's very important.

[1 : 31] We're on the map, second to last page, St. Paul's first and second journeys. They've printed the map so small so that you can't look at it for too long. Now, on the right-hand side, a little green province called Syria.

At the top is a town called Antioch. You need to know through the book of Acts there are two Antiochs. Syria and Antioch, where Paul and Barnabas were sent out on their first missionary journey.

And do you remember they went over to Cyprus and then on to the mainland. And last time we left them in Antioch, which is in Pisidia. You see that little green province under Galatia?

That's Pisidian Antioch, strangely. And now today we're going to go to Iconium, Lystra and Derbe, and then all the way back to Syrian Antioch.

That's the geography of where we're heading out. You may notice in the middle of the ocean there's a lovely comment. In the past it was believed that Paul visited the Galatian cities of Pesinas and Chira and Tavium.

[2 : 40] Modern scholars doubt this because that's what modern scholars do. So, this entire journey took a couple of years, 46 to 48 AD.

Do you know, in 45 when Paul headed out, there were no Christian congregations in all of Asia Minor. At the end of 10 years there are Christian congregations in every major city.

So let's go to chapter 14 of Acts. Because at the end of chapter 14, Paul and Barnabas report back to Antioch in Syria. And let's look at what they say.

Verse 26. From there they sailed to Antioch, where they had been commended to the grace of God for the work for which they had fulfilled. And when they arrived, they gathered the church together and declared all that God had done with them, how he had opened a door of faith to the Gentiles.

Chapter 14, we see God in action. We see God opening a door of faith to the Gentiles. And I think if we had not been told that, I wonder if that's what you had thought was really going on.

[3 : 53] I mean, we have a picture here of how God opens a door of faith, how God sets opportunity before people. It's very different than we may expect. I mean, if God is really opening a new door of opportunity, wouldn't you expect things to go well?

I mean, wouldn't you expect there to be some success, for things to come together, for there to be some level of safety and security? You wouldn't expect all sorts of hostility and opposition.

But what we find in Acts 14 is very different. Paul and Barnabas, you remember they were run out of Antioch this week, they're run out of Iconium.

Paul is stoned and left for dead in Lystra. And I want to show you one other cross-reference. If you keep your finger in Acts 14 and turn over to 2 Timothy for just a moment, the last cross-reference for today, page 199, one of the young men who came to faith when Paul preached at Lystra, his name's Timothy.

Later in life, when Paul is writing to Timothy, he reminds him of the first visit. In verse 10 of 2 Timothy 3, Paul says, Now you have observed my teaching, my conduct, my aim in life, my faith, my patience, my love, my steadfastness, my persecutions, my sufferings, what befell me at Antioch, at Iconium, and at Lystra, what persecutions I endured.

[5 : 27] Yet from all these, the Lord rescued me. Indeed, all who desire to live a godly life in Christ Jesus will be persecuted. Is that your picture of God opening a door of opportunity?

There is a very famous US tele-evangelist who is coming to Vancouver later in the year. Let's just call him Benny Spin. This week I received an invitation to the pastor's breakfast.

And I think I counted nine uses of the word awesome, inspiring, and exciting on the invite. And I was told that I should come and claim my miracle. The idea being that when Jesus is really with you, all your problems will disappear.

But what we see in chapter 14 is almost the opposite of that. You remember, Paul and Barnabas are coming from Antioch in Piscesia, where the whole intelligentsia, all the media, all the key people in the arts, the Antioch Board of Trade, have all turned against Christianity and the gospel.

And yet the Christians there remain joyful and full of the Spirit. What do you do when you've been thrown out of the major city of the province for preaching Christ faithfully? What do you do?

[6 : 51] Do you go back to home base? Lick your wounds? Do you go back to safety? Do you sit down and you rethink your strategy and say, you know, perhaps we ought to take some of those nasty bits out of the gospel, those bits about repentance and judgment?

Do you know what they do in chapter 14 is they take courage in their hands and they do what is unsafe, massively risky, unconventional.

And there are three episodes and I want to quickly look at them one at a time. And each one, I want you to see the risk of faith. The first is in verses 1 to 7 as they come to Iconium.

If you just look at those verses, you can see that they do the same thing that they did in Antioch.

They go to the synagogue and they preach as they've done again and again and again. And Luke emphasizes the word ministry.

You see verse 1, they spoke. Verse 3, they speaking boldly for the Lord. Verse 7, they preached the gospel because that is the way the gospel moves forward.

[7 : 52] That is the way the risen Christ brings salvation to people. It is through the preaching of the gospel. But how many verses does it take for persecution to break out? Answer? 1.

Verse 2, some from Antioch come and people's minds are poisoned and Christianity is seen as a pernicious threat. So what did Paul and Barnabas do?

Verse 3, they remained there a long time. They speak boldly for the Lord who bore witness to the word of his grace. Isn't that a great phrase?

Granting signs and wonders to be done by their hands that some of the people, but the people of the city were divided. Some sided with the Jews and some sided with the apostles. What's going on here?

God is showing his stunning and remarkable kindness to the people of Iconium. He has sent to them these apostles who are preaching the gospel. He confirms the truth of what they are preaching with signs and wonders.

[8 : 53] And he gives strength to Paul and Barnabas so that when the tide changes and things turn against them, they don't suddenly run away when it gets difficult.

They don't lie down in front of the lives. But they speak openly and boldly, which means clearly there was some sort of physical threat upon them because you don't need to be bold unless there is.

And the gospel that they are preaching is the word of God's grace. The Iconians don't deserve this. God in his kindness and mercy is offering them eternal life and the forgiveness of sins, the hope of glory, the transforming presence of his Holy Spirit through the gospel as he still does.

Whenever the gospel is preached, it is divisive. You see, some people, it's like a breath of life-giving oxygen and to others, it's like a poisonous cyanide.

Because the gospel and the hearing of the gospel always has this paradoxical effect on its hearers. It always brings unity and it always brings division.

[10:06] Whenever God truly reveals his son through the preaching of the gospel, it creates both unity and division. It did in the life and ministry and preaching of Jesus. It did in the life and the preaching of the apostles.

And it will in yours and it will in mine. The Bible is thoroughly realistic about this. Division is not nice. Division is a miserable reality. And it shows our terrible perversity that the gospel from God, which ought to be the source of our true unity, should become the object of such division.

But you see, the division here does not show that Paul and Barnabas, that their work is defective, that somehow they just needed to speak in a way that was more gracious and more relevant. Exactly the opposite is true. They were being true to the word of Christ and that is why the division took place. You cannot serve Christ and be at peace with the world.

Or as the apostle James says, do you not know that friendship with the world is enmity with God? Whoever wishes to be a friend of the world makes himself an enemy of God.

[11:20] So when these threats rise to abuse and then to physical violence, what do Paul and Barnabas do? They flee. Not to find a quiet and easy spot, but so that they continue preaching the gospel in verse 7.

Here is God opening a door of faith. And it's very interesting to watch when the apostles stay and speak boldly and when they get up and move on.

And I think what governs their choices becomes clearer in the second episode in Lystra. So let's look down at verses 8 to 20. And the first thing that happens at Lystra is a carbon copy of the miracle that happened at the temple through Peter, a man who's crippled from birth.

The apostle looks at him, orders him up, he leaps up, but the reaction here is very different. In Jerusalem, Peter was arrested. Lystra, the crowd, wants to make Paul and Barnabas gods.

Now, Dan Gifford and I have never had this response to our ministries, although Dan, some people did want Dan to go on Canadian Idol.

[12:42] You see in verse 11, the crowd says, the gods have come down to us in human form. They call Barnabas Zeus and Paul Hermes and the priest goes off and gets some cows and garlands.

You might think this is an unusual reaction, but there was a legend in the area. And the legend was this, Zeus and Hermes had assumed human form some years before and had come and visited the people of Lystra looking for hospitality.

And house after house after house, they received no hospitality whatsoever. They visited a thousand homes until finally one poor and elderly couple fed them and offered hospitality. And Zeus and Hermes then took them out onto their veranda and made them watch while they destroyed their neighbours with fire and transformed their hovel into the local temple.

So you could say that the locals were highly motivated towards hospitality. Now, I imagine that there are many church leaders today who would have just loved this.

You know, they would have loved to see this local religious expression. They would have received the garlands and overlooked the sacrifices and gone home to their hotels that night thinking things had gone very well.

[13:56] But Paul and Barnabas see the sacrifices coming and they spring into action. 14, they tear their garments. They rush out. Why are you doing this?

1st verse 15, we are also men of like nature with you. We bring you the gospel that you should turn from these vain things to a living God who made heaven, etc.

You don't tear your clothes unless you are in the presence of blasphemy. And Paul and Barnabas don't just say what you're doing is wrong. They tear their clothes and they rush into the crowd and physically try and restrain the crowd from offering sacrifices.

This is the second time in the first missionary journey that the gospel has come into confrontation with non-Christian religion. And both times are very helpful to us because they help us how to teach us how to think about other religions.

They are not value-neutral exercises. They are not the harmless expression of the universal spiritual impulse.

[15:07] They are futile and they are blasphemous because they steal glory from the true and living God. And the apostle has absolutely no regard for how ancient and well-established these

beliefs are.

He regards the religion as false, empty and spiritually hazardous. Whereas in verse 15 the aim of the gospel is to turn people away from these vain and empty things to the living God.

Turn people away from what cannot save them, what cannot bring them true life and forgiveness and grace, the transforming hope that we have in Jesus Christ. And I think what is so striking about this event is that we are able to see something of Paul and Barnabas true motivation.

What drives Paul and Barnabas is not results or numbers. It's not even so much their love for these people who they had never met.

What burns deep in their hearts is a love and a zeal for the glory of God and they cannot bear it when they see God's name soiled.

[16:27] They are filled with the jealousy that God would be treated as God and that his name would be treated as holy. It's like a personal injury to them when they see God so dishonoured and that is why they do this incredibly dangerous thing.

And I'm aware that today we are rightly nervous of religious fanaticism. But I want to remind you that zeal for the name and for the glory of the living God is a defining mark of all who belong to the living God.

You remember it was said of our Lord Jesus Christ himself in the words of the psalm, zeal for thy house consumes me. The insults that should fall on him fall on me.

So in verse 15 we hear the first sermon, the first Christian sermon ever preached to out and out pagans, possibly illiterate people, never heard of the Old Testament, never heard of Jesus Christ.

They had been speaking of Jesus but now they go back to basics. And I don't have time to go through this sermon but if you just look down from verse 15 to verse 17 they make four points about God.

[17:43] That God is the creator, he is transcendent above all things. Second, that he is sovereign and rules every person and every nation. Thirdly, that God reveals himself and wishes to be known.

And fourthly, that God is a God full of goodness, full of mercy, full of kindness, that he doesn't just satisfy your stomachs but he satisfies your hearts with gladness.

A lovely message isn't it? What's the response in verses 19 and 20? In monumental fickleness, the same people who want to make them gods turn very quickly and try to kill Paul by stoning him.

In thinking he's dead, they drag him outside the city. Somehow Paul survives and the next day he goes on to preach the gospel in Derbe.

And if you were writing a letter to the folks back home, I wonder if you would say that God had opened a door for the gospel. Well, we come to the third point and I'm taking a long time preaching this sermon because I want to get to 11 o'clock and see the late comers come in.

[18:54] This last section is very, very important. First verse 21 to 28. As you see, after two years of pioneer missionary work, there's one more vital thing to do to ensure that this door of the gospel remains open.

Let me just read three of the verses. In 21, when they had preached the gospel to Derbe and had made many disciples, they returned.

Can you believe it? You see, when we want to bring the gospel to a place, what we usually do is we have missions, don't we?

What does the apostle do? He founds churches. At the end of two years of gospel ministry in the province of Galatia, what does the apostle leave behind?

Churches. What is the flower of gospel ministry? It's not missionary organizations or denominational structures, it's local congregations.

[20:24] And the question we've got to ask, and the question I ask is, how can these congregations possibly survive? I mean, there's not a believer in Galatia who has known the gospel for more than two years.

The new congregations, they're fragile, they are facing vicious, physical, and bitter opposition and persecution. How can Paul leave them on their own?

Surely he needs to establish a head office or something like that. I want us to see in these last verses the provision the apostle makes to enable the door of faith to remain authentic.

He does three things, three gifts, three foundations to make sure that a church will not only survive but will thrive and grow. Here are the three.

The first is the apostolic teaching. You notice that in verse 21, Paul and Barnabas visit the churches, they strengthen, they exhort, and they encourage, they know that the Christians are going to backslide, they know that we go lukewarm very quickly and so they encourage them and strengthen them to continue in the faith.

[21 : 34] Through the New Testament this phrase keeps being used, the tradition, the deposit, the faith. It's a body, a recognizable and definable body of teaching.

We say it in the creed. Now what do you say to a group of Christians who have received this gospel face violence? And what do you say to this group of people, for example, who had watched Paul being beaten into unconsciousness?

Paul says this, verse 22, through many tribulations we must enter the kingdom of God. And I think if there's any text that summarizes the chapter, it's that one.

Through many tribulations we enter the kingdom of God. Do you want to know what it's like to see a door open for the faith? Through many tribulations we enter the kingdom of God.

See, there are two sides to following Jesus. On the one side, God has opened a door for us and we will enter through that into the kingdom of heaven. The path that you walk today, the path that I walk today, each day takes us a step closer to being in the kingdom of God where we will be with Christ and with one another, where there is no pain and no tears and no death and no sickness, where we see him face to face with redeemed, restored, renewed resurrection bodies.

[23 : 06] But there is another side to the Christian path. The path that we walk toward the kingdom of God is full of tribulations and difficulties and setbacks and sorrows not just one or two, but many tribulations says the apostle.

You notice in Iconium, it's not just the apostle who is the target of opposition and persecution. In verse two, it is the brethren face the persecution.

It's the brethren, it's the Christians in Iconium who are going to be misunderstood. And in verse 20, in Lystra, when they drag Paul's body out, you can read verse 20, it's written in such a way that the disciples don't gather around Paul after the danger has passed, but at the same time as the danger. After he passes out, they form a protective ring around him with their bodies. And this too is a door of faith. Here is the thing, what the apostle is teaching them and he's teaching us, is that it is these very tribulations through which God is going to bring us into the kingdom of God.

He is bringing us to heaven and every single one of us faces sorrows and difficulties and I don't know what your sorrows and difficulties and tribulations are right now. For some, they are the opportunity for massive self absorption and bitterness, but for others, they are the path that leads to joy in heaven.

[24 : 43] Let me put it more boldly for you. For some, their tribulations are a path to hell and for others, they are the path to heaven. This is the apostolic teaching and it is the first foundation for the church.

The second is pastoral oversight. See this in verse 23. the apostle appoints pastors so that the gospel will continue being preached.

It's a lovely picture here. The apostle doesn't impose people from the outside on congregations. They are elected from within. And he does not appoint one elder for one congregation.

It says in every congregation they appointed elders. In other words, they appoint a pastoral team, people who will work both full time and part time in the ministry of the gospel.

And when they use the word appoint, the word appoint has two meanings. It means putting your hand up for a vote and it means putting your hand down to lay your hand on someone. So I take it what happened was Paul and Barnabas didn't roll in and say, well, that person looks good, let's make them an elder.

[25 : 57] They had a congregational election but then after the election Paul stamps that person with authority and lay hands on them. Later on when Paul is writing to Timothy, he says these are the qualifications when you need to appoint elders in the congregation.

They must be people who have demonstrable moral integrity, they must be people who are loyal to the apostolic teaching and they must be people who are able to teach the flock of God.

So Paul leaves the churches with apostolic teaching and with pastoral oversight and the third and final thing, is he gives them, offers to them the protection of God, prays and commits them to the Lord.

The most important thing we can say about the church is it's not a human invention. Every church, this church, every congregation has been created by God, it is sustained by God and it is ruled by God.

And humanly speaking, it's just as absurd for us to think that we can continue on without God as it was for these congregations. And ultimately their protection and our protection does not come through structural, legal, organisational means.

[27 : 14] The gospel moves forward through tribulation as the gospel is preached, as Christians encourage one another and strength one another to face the suffering and to pray for the blessing of God.

God. I want to finish with this. This is what it looks like for God to open a door of faith. It's risky, it's unsafe, it's even frightening.

It's not that if we face difficulty and roadblocks we need to look somewhere else for the open door. It's that God opens the door through those tribulations because it is through many tribulations that we must enter the kingdom of heaven.

And it may be because we live in a very cautious culture, an overly litigious society. We have become so risk averse, we've become so careful and prudent that in the end of the day we may walk through nothing whatsoever.

If the flower of the gospel is the creation of new congregations, how have we been fed? Are there difficulties and roadblocks for us as individuals or for us as a congregation?

[28 : 36] The idea that there's a time coming when everything's going to be safe and secure just means that God is not adequate for us today. I want to say if you have something in your heart that you wish to do for God, facing enormous roadblocks, go ahead, see the door open.

And as a congregation, if there is something in our heart that God is calling us to do, we need to go ahead and see the door open, because it is through many tribulations that we must enter the kingdom of God.

amen. You hear in Gloria and let go ahead and pour en ali