

A Missio Worth Dying For

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Preacher: Walt Alexander

[0 : 00] The following message is given by Walt Alexander, lead pastor of Trinity Grace Church in Athens, Tennessee.! For more information about Trinity Grace, please visit us at TrinityGraceAthens.com.

Acts 12, verse 25. And Barnabas and Saul returned from Jerusalem when they had completed their service, bringing with them John, whose other name was Mark.

John Mark, who we read about in other parts of the scriptures. Acts 13, verse 1 says, Now there were in the church at Antioch prophets and teachers, Barnabas, Simeon, who is called Niger, Lucius of Cyrene, Manian, a lifelong friend of Herod the Tetrarch, and Saul.

While they were worshiping and fasting, the Holy Spirit said, Set apart for me Barnabas and Saul for the work to which I've called them. Then after fasting and praying again, as we see again and again, they laid their hands on them and sent them off.

And flip your Bible, just maybe one page, to Acts 14. And we're going to kind of catch up with Paul at the end of this in verse 21.

[1 : 28] 14, 21 says, When they had preached the gospel to that city, that is Lystra, 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 church with prayer and fasting, they committed them to the Lord in whom they had believed. Then they passed through Pisidia and came to Panthia.

And when they had spoken to the word in Perga, they went down to Atalea. And from there they sailed to Antioch, where they had been commended to the grace of God for the work that they had fulfilled.

That's what happened in Acts 13, 3. And when they arrived and gathered the church together, they declared all that God had done with them, and how he had opened a door of faith to the Gentiles. And they remained no little time with the disciples. That is the word of God. I know I read kind of an interesting chunk of it, but it'll make sense as we get going.

[2 : 43] That's the only authoritative and inerrant word you will hear this morning. I recently heard this humorous story about a British pastor and a member of his congregation.

There's a distinguished and well-known English preacher who was approached by a congregation member who complained about some aspect of church life. It may have been that he didn't feel welcome in some way, or it may have been that he was having a hard time finding friends in this church and finding a way to fit in.

It could have been that he was finding the service dissatisfying and the preaching too long. And I only just got started, so give me a break. But, you know, it could have been the music he was unable to connect with and didn't have a taste for.

Or it could have been his family that was not being cared for well, according to his estimation or up to his satisfaction. The details of the complaint have been lost as the story has been told again and again.

The preacher, though, he listened to the complaint. He paused. And then he replied with five words that cut straight to the heart, not only of this man's problem, but the problem with all grumbling and complaining in the church.

[4 : 00] He said, it's not about you, stupid. And he walked off, just like a typical Brit would do, you know.

And, you know, in many ways, I'm grateful I rarely hear complaints. And I know my experience is not the norm for pastors based on the ones I interact with.

And I don't intend to take up that response when I do hear complaints. But that response cuts straight to the heart of many of our troubles in the church. Often our difficulty and disappointment is not when the church strays theologically.

Our difficulty and disappointment is when the church strays from what we expect or what we want or what we think we need.

It is when the preaching is too long or when the songs are too familiar or too wordy or too repetitive. Or when the new guy takes over our row.

[5 : 00] You know how it is. That gets mighty territorial where you said. That or when someone replaces you as a teacher in children's ministry and we're left to serve in a way we didn't expect and a way we don't really like.

Or when the church grows and we're no longer in the know. Or just when things change. Change in a church is not something we like. We often look back and want to remain in and romanticize about the past.

And all it takes is a little change to shift us up. All of us are vulnerable to unrealistic expectation in the church and vulnerable to complaining when they're not met.

The church is not about us. And if it's not about us, it's because it's about Jesus Christ. It's about Jesus Christ and his plan to take the gospel to the end of the earth.

This morning we're going to continue our study of the book of Acts. And continue our study of Paul being sent from this church in Antioch. And literally planting churches throughout the Mediterranean world.

[6 : 13] And it's a wonderful text. It unpacks our mission as a church. And in many ways, I want to have a bit of a straight talk with us this morning. You know, our mission on our website, if you've ever been on there, clearly my wife has not been on there too often.

You know, we exist to treasure the grace of God by gathering together to worship Jesus and scattering to live honestly and love the people of Athens. It's a bit of a mouthful.

And if I could say, that's our mission. If I could say that the mission under the mission, though, is this. Let us be a gospel-centered church that outlives us and thrives long after we're gone.

That's my goal. I want to be dead in this church continuing to go. Let us be a gospel-centered church that outlives us and thrives long after we're gone.

And so I think this text is going to give us an opportunity to kind of think about that and wrestle with that. And so let's do that. First is, remember, we are not a museum for saints.

[7 : 17] Remember, we are not a museum for saints. I'm sure you've heard the phrase that the church is not a museum for saints. It's a hospital for sinners. And I just love that, right? Isn't that so good? It's not a place where saints sit and gather dust.

It's a place where broken sinners gather and find mercy. That's why Jesus said those who are well have no need of a physician. They have no need of a hospital. But those who are sick do.

And he says, I came to call sinners, not the righteous. If I could tweak that a little bit, I would say the church is not just a hospital for sinners.

It's a medic tent in the battlefield. It's a first aid station in the midst of war. It's not merely there to bandage us and stitch us up.

It's there to redeploy us to battle. My point is the church is on a mission. In one respect, in what we see in our passage, the church is a mission.

[8 : 24] Jesus Christ left his mission in the hands of one group of people, the church of Jesus Christ. And it is the mechanism. It is the people. It is the moving battlefield first aid tent that's meant to go all the way to the end of the earth.

So the church is not a museum. It's a lean, or it should be a lean, mean community bent on taking the gospel as far as they can possibly go. And then tossing the baton to the next generation.

And so that's what we immediately see in our text. Look down there with me in verse chapter 13.

You know, the church in Antioch had just been planted. We remember that from Acts 11 several weeks ago. And they've been planted, but they're immediately aggressive in mission.

And that's what I pointed out. That's why I read verse 25 there is that Paul and Barnabas are sent down to Jerusalem. So after they're planted by the church in Jerusalem, they immediately send down money through Paul and Barnabas to take care of something that was going on there.

Which is just incredible, right? You're just planted, but you give to the mother church immediately. And then they send Paul and Barnabas out again. I don't know about you, but I think Paul and Barnabas would be a good guy to have on staff.

[9 : 35] A good guy to have around Antioch to kind of work through any theological difficulties coming their way. But that's not the way they think. And they give us this snapshot of the church in Antioch. And I just love it.

Look at verse 1. Now they were gathered in the church, prophets and teachers. Barnabas, Simeon, Lucius, Manan, Saul.

I mean, this is a vibrant group of people. You immediately see the spirits present, prophets and teachers. It's a diverse church. All those names are meant to signify. All these people have been drawn into this church from all around Antioch.

Antioch is a prosperous city. And it's drawing in people. It's drawing in influential people to do an extraordinary work for the Lord. And so they have Barnabas from Cyprus, Simeon from Africa, Manan, who's a friend of Herod the ruler, the emperor, Paul from Tarsus.

They kind of all come in. And you see that there, right? Verse 2, while they were worshiping the Lord and fasting, the Holy Spirit said, set apart for me, Paul and Barnabas.

[10 : 40] Then after fasting and praying, they laid their hands on them, and they sent them out. They're praying and fasting again. Following the Lord's leading, they send out their main asset for the work the Lord had called them to do.

So what's this work? That's some of what we're going to study this morning. But what Paul immediately does is preaches the gospel and plants gospel-centered churches.

He preaches the gospel and plants gospel-preaching churches. That's the mission of the church in Antioch. That's what they send Paul to do. In many ways, or what theologians would call this section, Acts 13-14, is the first missionary journey of Paul.

Now, it's the so-called missionary journey. Nowhere in the text calls it that. But that's what he does. He's sent out, and then he comes back to this church. I think we have a map for you that will show you this journey.

So he leaves from Antioch of Syria. So there's two Antiochs in our text, which might get a little bit confusing. But Luke does point it out for us. So they leave from starting point up there with a quotation block from Antioch of Syria.

[11 : 43] And they travel by boat, clearly, to Cyprus. And they begin in Salamis. And actually, I don't know how to pronounce that word, so don't throw anything at me.

Salamis, maybe. Paphos. Then they go up to Perga. Then they go up to Antioch of Pisidia. Then they go into Galatia, you see, with Iconium, Lystra, and Derbe.

And then Paul comes back the same way he went. Now, I don't flash maps up a lot, mainly because I can't pronounce anything on them. But I think it's helpful to see.

This is Paul in his mid-50s. This is not a young man out for the mission. This is Paul in his mid-50s living full out to the tilt for Christ.

And I just love it. And so they begin. You can take that down. And they begin by proclaiming the word of God. If you look down with me in chapter 13 and verse 5, when they get to Salamis, they proclaim the word of God in the synagogues of the Jew.

[12 : 46] Look down in verse 16 there. Paul stood up in the synagogue again, motioning with his hands, men of Israel, listen to me, for he's proclaiming the words.

And we continue through Acts 13 and 44 and 49. Paul proclaims the word of God again on the Sabbath in the midst of the assembly. And we could just keep going.

They go out. They proclaim the gospel of Jesus Christ. Paul is moving into this new area and proclaiming a message they'd never heard. If you don't know the message of the gospel, the message of the gospel that God has done everything you need to reconcile you to him.

It does tell us bad news first because it tells us we are alienated from him because of sin. And he is angry with us so much. We are enemies with him is what Romans 5 says because of sin and the ways we've strayed.

But God has sent Paul. God sends gospel preachers to reclaim this message that all that needed to be done is done. Be reconciled to God.

[13 : 48] So if you believe in your heart. This day you can be cleansed of all your sins.

So like Jesus, Paul firstly begins to preach. You know, he's not out there with a bandages banding up people or healing people or something like that.

He's out there beginning to preach. And we see that throughout. In fact, look with me in Acts 14. You can flip over there. Sorry to keep you in your Bibles, although I'm not sorry for that. So you can flip there to Acts 14 to this is what he says in Iconium.

When the unbelieving Jews stirred up the Gentiles trying to get them to persecute Paul. And poison their minds against the brothers. So they remained a long time.

I just love that when they found out their persecution was coming. They found out their minds are being poisoned, seeking to undo the work that Paul was doing. So they just stayed longer.

[14:49] That's the way he works. And they bore witness to the word of his grace, granting signs and wonders to be done by their hands. So they preach.

And this is incredible. After preaching, they established local churches. Look in verse 21 of chapter 14.

When they preached the gospel to that city and had made many disciples, they returned to Lystra, Iconium, and Antioch. That's what we're talking about. They're going back the way they came there. They strengthened the souls of the disciples, encouraging them to continue in faith, saying that through many tribulations we must enter the kingdom of God. Now look at verse 23. And when they had appointed elders for them in every church with prayer and fasting, they committed them to the Lord.

Now that's incredible. Now maybe it's just because I'm a churchman, but that's incredible. So Paul goes throughout this area. Once there was not anyone preaching, let alone a church, and now there are pastors, there are elders praying and preaching all throughout this area.

[16:00] I'd call that a successful journey. It's vital to see what's going on here. It's telling us the great commission is not merely to preach the gospel and make disciples, as if tallying up decisions for Christ is the only thing that matters.

The great commission is to plant churches. That's what the text says so that people who hear the gospel and respond have a place to live out the gospel and community.

Tim Keller helps us with this. Much traditional evangelism aims to get a decision for Christ.

Experience, however, shows that many of these decisions disappear and never result and change lives.

Only a person who's being evangelized in the context of an ongoing worshiping and shepherding community can be sure of finally coming home to vital saving faith. Do you see what he's saying is the success of conversion is not merely the preaching of the gospel and the response to it, but the infiltration into a dark world of a community where vital saving faith can thrive.

That's our mission as a church. We're not after decisions for Christ. If I was, we'd do a tent downtown. We're trying to build a community where vital saving faith can thrive.

[17:21] We're trying to build a church that preaches the gospel and outlast us and thrives after we're gone. You know, it'd be so much easier to build a church for us. We could tailor design the programs to fit all our needs.

We could make sure everybody's serving where they want. We could make less room for new folks. We could even get a farm and go live together or something, but that'd be kind of weird, so I'm not doing that.

You're on your own. But the point is, you know, we could do all these things that kind of center around us, but before long we would shrivel and die. Instead, let's build a church for others.

Let's build a church for the unchurched and for the overchurched in our community. Let's build a church for our children.

I recently re-read a book that I love about pastoral ministry. And D.A. Carson was telling the story of talking with a Mennonite leader and talking about the history of the Mennonite movement.

[18:30] He said that, you know, the first generation of Mennonites, they cherished the gospel. And they believed that the gospel called them to live in certain ways.

Socially, you know, pulling away from society. Politically, in the way they involved themselves in society. So the first generation got it right. They cherished the gospel and they lived in certain ways, right?

He said this Mennonite leader said the second generation, though, assumed the gospel. So the gospel was no longer an explicit value.

And they emphasized those ways of living, those social and political ways of living. Then he says the third generation discarded the gospel.

And only identified themselves with a way of living. What that means is that we're always only two generations away from fumbling the gospel entirely.

[19 : 35] That's incredibly sobering. It means if we set our sights right here and now, we just miss it. We can very easily miss it.

And so the first thing we must do as a church that wants to live this way is to passionately preach and love the gospel. It's not enough for us to build a church for us. It's not enough that we're even passionate about the gospel.

We must build a church that's so centered explicitly on the gospel so that years from now, it remains that way. And this is a tall order. I saw a tweet this week of a church rejoicing.

It's a friend of mine in Nashville rejoicing that after eight years, they had 80 kids in children's ministry. And then later on that day, I met with our children's ministry teachers and realized we basically have 80 after 16 months.

So we have 53 kids, third grade and younger, another 24 in fourth to eighth grade. I mean, what a privilege and yeah, right, what a responsibility.

[20 : 39] You know, my goal is not just to be passionate about the gospel. My goal is that my kids and these kids are more passionate than me.

That's the only thing that will stand the test of time. So we must preach the gospel. We must keep the gospel centered. And, you know, we love church planting.

I want us to be, I know this sounds so pie in the sky maybe to you, but I want us to be a church planting church. I want us to plant churches from this church.

And that one church planting, I believe in it with all my heart. I believe it establishes that vital saving faith for people in communities that don't have a healthy church to be in.

And I believe there's a dozen reasons I could go into that I can't do right now. But one of the things we want to do right now is just encourage church planters. Even though we're 16 months in, we want to encourage them.

[21 : 34] So we gave a gift, as we told you, the family night to a little church in Fayetteville, Arkansas. I got an email last night that they wanted to pray for us this morning. I just thought that was great. But we have a little friendship with this church, and we're trying to encourage them.

We're trying to be a brother. You know, we're praying we're going to give to a church that's about to be planted later on this year or in the beginning of 2021 in Addis Ababa, Ethiopia.

Now, what are we doing in Ethiopia? Great question. But a friend of ours, friend of mine, Michael Granger from Louisville, Kentucky, married an Ethiopian gal and now has been living there, learning the language, and is preparing to hopefully, in his vision, plant gospel preaching churches all throughout that country.

And we get to help. And so I want us to thrive. I want us to encourage those things. Let us be a gospel-centered church that outlives us and thrives long after we're gone. If we're going to do that, we've got to remember we're not a museum.

Second, remember we're not just for people like you. We're not just for people like you. Paul and Barnabas set out to preach the gospel to everyone in each city, but they do it in a specific way.

[22 : 46] Paul has a pattern if you read these verses. I can encourage you to do that later on today. They first preach in the synagogue, and I pointed that out a few moments ago. They go and preach where Jews gather, firstly.

Then they go and preach to all the Gentiles, all the non-Jews who we studied about with Cornelius, the Caesarean, and the Gentile. And so they adopt this specific pattern to bring the gospel first to the Jews because those are the ones who should have been looking for Jesus Christ and looking for the gospel.

And then they take it to the Gentiles. You see this in Romans 1.16. For I'm not ashamed of the gospel. It's the power of God for salvation to everyone who believes to the Jew first and to the Greek.

He's not saying Jews are better than Greek. He's saying there's a priority in the way the gospel is to go forth in his mind. And he's loyal to this all throughout his writing to the Jews first and then to the Greek.

And so he preaches the gospel, firstly, to Jews in Antioch and Pisidia. That's what we saw. All of Acts 13, really, that back half of it, is all about Paul preaching this gospel in Antioch and Pisidia. [23 : 53] I wish I could unpack it all day today. It's the longest synagogue sermon we have in the New Testament. And yet it's just the same gospel we've heard again and again.

That's why I'm not going to unpack it right now. It's the same gospel. The Jews killed Jesus Christ. God raised him. And we are witnesses. We're here to tell you about it. Jesus revealed himself to Paul.

And so he goes and tells. But I will point out one verse. Look in Acts 13, 38 and 39. So he's after preaching this gospel to this Jewish audience that did not hang him on the tree. He says, Let it be known to you, therefore, brothers, that through this man forgiveness of sins is proclaimed to you. And by him everyone who believes is freed from everything from which you could not be freed by the law of Moses. Amen. Amen. That's incredible news.

And to a Jew trying to do it right. That's freedom. Then Paul preaches to Gentiles. In Lystra, he preaches to pagans.

[24 : 56] Pagans are just people that worship another god. They worship maybe an unknown god, an idol. And so he preaches there. Look in chapter 14.

I know I'm keeping you moving today. Look down there in verse 14. Paul is preaching that he heals this crippled man. And these pagans, when they see him heal this man, they're like, oh, my goodness, this must be another god.

So they begin to praise and worship him. They call Paul Zeus and Hermes. That's what they call Paul and Barnabas. So they begin to worship these men.

And Paul does not like that, unlike Herod that we saw last week. And so he addresses them. Look in verse 14 of chapter 14. He says, when the apostles and Barnabas and Saul heard it, they tore their garments and rushed out into the crowd, crying out, men, why are you doing these things? We are men of like nature with you. We bring you good news that you may turn from these vain things to the living God who made the heaven and the earth and the sea and all that is in them.

[26 : 01] In the past generations, he allowed all 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.

I love this little note that Luke left in there. And even with these words, they scarcely restrained the people from offering sacrifices to them. That's supposed to be funny, you know.

I mean, well, maybe not funny. But it's interesting, right? It's a very different message. There's nothing about Abraham or the land or the promises or exile or anything or exodus.

Instead of talking to them about what they don't know, Paul talks to them about what he knows. That's what we see in Romans. He says, you know, you don't know that there's a God by the law, but you know it in your heart.

You know he's good. No one doesn't know that there's a God. He said, you know it by the rain and the fruit. Now, we know that. We should know that by the rain because we've seen a lot of that lately.

[27 : 08] And you know it by food and gladness and the living God, he's the one behind it all. Turn to him. And I just find it so neat. Paul is not like a car salesman that has one message.

He's a preacher who's trying to become all things to all people. And so what's the point of all this? The point is the same gospel is for everyone. We saw this already when the centurion was saved and Peter saw the sheep.

We saw this when the Hellenists and Antioch were saved by the work of God. But now Paul and Barnabas are decisively moving and taking the gospel into all sorts of people. I think the point is the gospel is not just for you.

It's not just for people like you. Not just for people like me. You know, we can be content when the Lord saves someone we like.

But do we believe he can save people we don't like? That's what's going on. The Jews and Gentiles, they weren't like, you know, cousins that were glad to be reunited. They hated each other. And yet the gospel is going forward.

[28 : 31] In order to be faithful to our mission, we cannot settle for the gospel being preached only to people like us. That's what the Jews in Antioch, they were okay with their friends being saved but not with others.

We can't settle for a gospel plus community. You know, we Christians are funny people. You know, we have our own language, Christianese. We say a lot of the same things, don't we? Bless your pee-picking heart or something like that. You know, or we say, it was a God thing. Oh, really? What's that mean? You know? I think I know what I mean. Or let go and let God. I just need it. I'm just working on my testimony.

I need to tell you my testimony. I remember talking to one guy one time. I just said, how's your soul? He's like, what are you talking about? How's your soul? I mean, it's just kind of like, that's not what he uses in daily interactions.

[29 : 29] And we do a lot of the same funny things, too, with our side hugs. Yeah, that's the only ones that are legal, in case you didn't know. Or our coffee, you know.

Every Christian is like a coffee addict. And I'm talking addict. Or maybe the essential oils that we diffuse and sell in the back of the church, right?

Jesus was turning over tables. There were no quail on there. There was essential oils that were bursting out. Or quiet times. I mean, I remember the first becoming Christian.

What in the world are you talking about, you know? Is this like circle time in pre-K or something? But, you know, if we're not careful, we can build a church that's just gathered around similarities. It could be race. It could be social status. Like you make a certain amount of money or maybe the neighborhood you live in.

[30 : 31] It could be life stage. You know, our culture likes to separate us. All the single people over here, divorced people over here, whatever. Oh, man. It could be a political party. I hope there's always people on the left and right in this room.

Because I don't know where I am. It could be a way of schooling. It could be our preference for alternative medicine. But if we gather around these similarities, no one in Athens will be shocked. It'll just be another community that would exist just fine if God didn't exist. How are we doing? Are we gathered around the gospel?

I think we are. You know, I'm not trying to correct anybody. Are we together because our kids go to the same school or because we live in the same types of neighborhoods?

Or are we together because of Jesus Christ? We must not settle. I know I'm preaching to the choir. But we must not settle.

[31 : 31] If we settle, our community becomes superficial and shallow. When we settle, we only talk to people we know. We only talk about the things we know. And, you know, I don't know about you, but as the church has grown and more people in here, I don't know everybody.

And I'm sure you don't know everybody. So Sunday can be one of those hard moments where you're kind of just aware of who you don't know. It's kind of like Tom Brady. I don't know if you've ever seen the gif of him walking on the sidelines looking for somebody to shake hands with.

Have you ever seen that after a touchdown? Nobody really likes Tom Brady, not even his teammates, but that's another thing. But essentially, you can feel that way on Sunday morning.

Who do I talk to? Where do I fit in?

And it's precisely that moment I want to push us to not be superficial, but to press in. Not just with a nod or a wave, but to move towards someone.

Consider inviting over one person you don't know each month to get to know them. They're created in the image of God. God's done a dramatic work in their heart in bringing them from life to death.

[32 : 32] And they want to tell you about it. No one has to be pushed to talk about themselves. Just invite them over and say, tell us. We would be an incredible church if we just did that.

More importantly, when we settle, our community has no room for people unlike us. Do whatever you have to do to make strangers friends and friends family.

Become all things to all people. Thirdly, we will not be treated better than Jesus. We will not be treated better than Jesus.

A lot of things happened on this trip that probably surprised Paul. I don't know. But one thing definitely did not surprise him, and that was trouble. Paul is, he encounters trouble.

Paul and Barnabas encounter trouble. The different people oppose him. And in Antioch, the Jews rise up against him. And then he runs to Iconium, and they run after him. They try to stone him. He goes to Lystra, continue to preach the gospel.

[33 : 37] Then the Jews from Iconium and Antioch catch up with him and stone him. They drag him out of the city and leave him for dead. That's what he was talking about in 2 Corinthians 11.

Paul and Barnabas are not treated better than Jesus, and nor will we. Matthew 10 gets right to the point. If they called the master of the house, that's Jesus, Beelzebub, how much more will they malign and mock those of his household?

Servant will not be treated greater than their master. So it's no surprise when Paul goes back through those areas, and he goes back to encourage the churches.

He essentially says, get ready and hold on tight. I think it's so fascinating. Look down in verse 21 and 22 of chapter 14. He said, when they preached the gospel in that city, and they made many disciples, they returned back to the way they went, 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.

How's that for encouragement? Trouble's coming. Many tribulations are coming. It may be the most important thing Paul could say because it's the very thing Jesus Christ kept saying to his disciples.

[34 : 56] Prepare for persecution. Prepare for trouble. Prepare for suffering. God would say the same thing for us. If we're going to be a church that outlasts us and thrives long after we're gone, we're going to have to be a church that suffers well.

I don't think we'll face life-threatening persecution soon in our country, but we will likely, I know we will continue to experience the brokenness of life in the fallen world, the deceitful schemes and the plundering of the evil one, the discouraging consequences of our personal sins.

The future is not going to go according to plan. Get ready. Make ready for it. Don't be surprised.

Prepare for suffering. We prepare our kids for so many things, for a good resume, a good education, doing well in school, getting along with other people, respecting authority, but do we prepare them to suffer through many tribulations?

What life are we preparing our kids for? Prepare for suffering. Tim Keller says in his book, suffering will either make you a better person or it will make you a much worse person.

[36 : 15] It's not a zero-sum game. You need your best theology for your darkest moments. That's not the moment where you need a kind of a flimsy plaque to hang in the kitchen.

And, you know, if you have that plaque hanging in the kitchen, it's nothing personal, but you need your best theology when your mother dies, when you lose another job, when the cancer returns, when the aches in your back and neck never leave, when you're slandered, when your spouse chooses an online image over you again.

Don't wing it then. Prepare. Get your best theology and put it to work. It's what will sustain you.

So why suffering, you know? Why the cost? Surely we know we don't deserve better treatment than Jesus, but why was Jesus treated that way and why too are we?

I don't know why. I don't know the reason. We may never know the reason. I don't encourage you to go look for the reason, but their purposes. And one of the purposes is that we would be a people.

[37 : 27] We'd be a church that longs for heaven. A church, a this-worldly institution that's caught up with the next world. Earlier this week, during one of our many rain days, we re-watched the old movie Apollo 13.

I'm sure you know about that movie. On April 11, 1970, less than a year after Neil Armstrong and Buzz Aldrin landed on the moon, three men, Jim Lovell, Jack Swigert, and Fred Hayes, were launched in Apollo 13 to make another trip to the moon.

JFK said he wanted multiple trips by the end of 1970. And just minutes after the TV broadcast of their launch turned off, they found out the oxygen tank needed to breathe and for power was leaking into space.

And you probably remember, you've seen this movie with Tom Hanks as the lead actor. And they were forced to come home, but the problem is they were rapidly losing oxygen.

And this is where my extent of understanding this really starts to fall apart. But if they directly aborted, they may not make it. They may not have enough fuel in using the planned aborted route, the planned return route.

[38 : 46] And so they had to do another plan. They powered down much of their system. Now this is crazy. They're floating through space, powered down, no heat, no air, working to get back to Earth.

NASA had to redo all their calculations. It said they powered everything down so they were doing all their calculations by hand. That's why your mom teaches you math. Doesn't want you to rely on a calculator because one day you might not have it.

And they're doing it. NASA agents are working tirelessly on the ground in Houston, doing the math, to direct the loop, to get them back around the moon is what they devised. And to bring them home, they're unsure of whether it would work.

They're unsure of whether they have the power to get there. The nation waits in fear and anticipation. On April 17, the three men landed safely in the Indian Ocean.

That happened 50 years ago, so I'm not spoiling anything. But interviewing, afterwards we watched Behind the Scenes because my kids love to watch it. And Tom Hanks says, I love the script because it's a story we all love.

[39 : 53] And so I was just waiting for what he was going to say. It's the story of three men fighting to get home. That's the church. Oh.

All this suffering, all this persecution, it's because we're a bunch of people trying to get home. I just want to make it to the other side.

I just want to press on. Come on, cancer. Come on. I'll pass through anything to get home. We'll never be a church that outlives us and thrives long after we're gone if we're living for this life.

And suffering in its own little way pushes us homeward. And until we get there, it unites us as a church.

One theologian says, all Christians are saints, sinners, and suffers. You want to add something to your hospitality tonight, invite somebody over, say, where are your scars?

[41 : 08] Where are your wounds? Where have the battles for faith been in your life? Where have you been tempted to throw in the towel? Everyone's got them.

They often hide at church. But let us be a people who suffer together. But more than that, a people that follow a suffering servant who is with us and will supply all the grace to take us all the way there.

Let us pray. Father in heaven, we humble ourselves before you. We fear you and love you. We worship you. We want to be a church. We don't think high thoughts about ourselves.

Lord, we are not impressed with ourselves. No one in this room is. But Lord, we're amazed by grace and we want a church that's amazed by it for generations to come.

We call on you, God. Let your kingdom come and your will be done in this community for the glory of Jesus Christ.

[42 : 12] You've been listening to a message given by Walt Alexander, lead pastor of Trinity Grace Church in Athens, Tennessee.

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