

ACTS

Please turn in your Bibles this evening to Acts chapter 14 as we continue our study through the Word of God.

If you remember from our last study, Paul is on his first missionary journey, and Barnabas is with him.

John Mark left them in Perga in Pamphylia because of fear or something and he headed back home.

And as Paul and Barnabas are in Antioch in Pisidia they irritate some of the Jews because they spoke of God's salvation coming to the Gentiles.

In Acts 13:50 we are told, "**But the Jews stirred up the devout and prominent women and the chief men of the city, raised up persecution against Paul and Barnabas, and expelled them from their region.**"

These Jews caused such a disturbance that Paul and Barnabas were kicked out of the city, and thus, they move on to Iconium, about 80 miles southeast of Antioch.

What I want you to see is that they did not give up, they did not throw in the towel, they just keep moving forward with the Gospel message in spite of the difficulties that they were facing. What an example for us to learn from and follow. Never give up!

Let me share this true story with you about sticking to the task no matter what happens!
We are told,

One night in 1945 Captain Terry Simeral brought his crippled B-29 in for a safe landing amidst waiting fire engines and red flares, unloaded the plane, and entered the group headquarters tent. His face was white. He seemed to be in a state of shock, and it was several minutes before he could talk. An incredible feat had been accomplished as Captain Simeral piloted his Pathfinder plane toward the enemy coast in order to drop phosphorus smoke to make the mission's target.

On B-29s it was the radio operator's job to release the bomb through a narrow tube. On this particular night Sgt. Henry Erwin received the routine order, triggered the flare, and dropped it down the tube. But there was a malfunction, and the bomb exploded and bounced back into Erwin's face, blinding both eyes and searing off an ear. Burning phosphorus melts metal like butter, and the bomb was now at Sgt. Erwin's feet and eating rapidly through the deck of the plane toward a full load of incendiaries. He was alone because the navigator had gone to the transparent dome atop the plane to make some celestial computations.

Not having the luxury of time to analyze his situation, Erwin picked up the white-hot bomb in his bare hands and stumbled forward toward the cockpit, groping along with elbows and feet. The navigator's folding table was down and latched, blocking the way. Sgt. Erwin hugged the blazing bomb under one arm as it burned the flesh over his ribs, unfastened the latch, and lifted the table. He stumbled on, a walking torch. His clothing and hair were ablaze. Dense smoke filled the plane, and Simeral had opened the window beside him to clear the air.

“I could not see Erwin,” says Simeral, “but I heard his voice right at my elbow. He said, ‘Pardon me, sir,’ and reached across the window and tossed the bomb out. Then he collapsed on the flight deck.” Amazingly, Sgt. Erwin survived and went on to regain the use of his hands and partial vision in one eye. Sgt. Henry Erwin is one of our country’s Congressional Medal of Honor winners, receiving it from General Curtis LeMay while still in a Pacific hospital.

The story of Sgt. Henry Erwin and the blazing bomb is one of the most amazing accounts of valor I have ever read. It is a tribute to the human spirit. . . .

The supreme Christian examples come to us from the early church. Acts 14 shows us the consistently courageous attitude of the apostles in their loyalty to Christ through thick and thin. Specifically, the first missionaries bravely held to their purpose of preaching Christ despite extreme temptations. Their valiant and consistent attitude is a great model for us. . . .

Having been booted out of Pisidian Antioch, Paul and Barnabas now headed elsewhere. They went southeast some eighty miles on the famous Via Sebaste through rolling countryside, then past the snow-capped peaks of Sultan Dag, until they came to the beautiful plateau surrounded by fertile plains and verdant forests – Iconium.

- R. Kent Hughes, Acts – The Church Afire, pp. 181-182

May we learn from men and women who forged ahead with the Gospel of Jesus Christ, they did not give up no matter what came their way.

With that said, let’s begin reading in Acts chapter 14, beginning in verse 1 and let’s see what the Lord has for us as we study through His Word and we come to the conclusion of Paul’s first missionary journey!

ACTS 14**VERSE 1**

So they left the coastal plains and they headed up to the region of Iconium, Lystra and Derbe were and they were in the area of Galatia. So keep that in mind when you read the letter that Paul wrote to the Galatians, he was writing to these people.

And in Iconium Paul and Barnabas go into the Synagogue of the Jews and they share Christ with both Jews and Gentiles. What is interesting is that in Antioch the Jews expelled Paul and Barnabas from that city. But here we see many come to saving faith!

And as God is working, as lives are being transformed by the power of God, what do you think is going to happen? Let's read on and see.

VERSES 2-3

So as God is working the enemy is right their ready to try to stop it. We need to understand that the Devil does not want people to come to saving faith. And if God is moving, the Devil is trying to thwart or stop or frustrate what God is doing.

Notice what these unbelieving Jews did to the unbelieving Gentiles, they poisoned their minds. Sounds harsh, but the poison of unbelief is deadly, and I think that is the point.

So now there is this turmoil going on, what will Paul and Barnabas do?

They remained in Iconium, they were not going to let persecution deter them from the work that God was doing and God worked through them with signs, pointing them to Jesus, and with wonders, which speaks of a sense of awe in what they saw happen.

And notice what these miracles were doing, “**bearing witness to the word of His grace.**”

You see, the miraculous signs were done in order to prove the Word of God to the people. Today we see the Word of God being tossed aside and people are running to and fro after signs and wonders, and that is not biblical!

They were teaching and preaching the word of God and that was the chief emphasis of their ministry was the teaching of the word of God. The signs and wonders followed the teaching of the Word to confirm the Word of God in the hearts of the people.

In Mark 16:17-18 Jesus said, “**And these signs will follow those who believe: In My name they will cast out demons; they will speak with new tongues; they will take up serpents; and if they drink anything deadly, it will by no means hurt them; they will lay hands on the sick, and they will recover.**”

Thus, as you are serving the Lord, signs and wonders will flow from your life. Don't put the cart in front of the horse, serve the Lord and see what He will do in you and through you!

And I want you to notice how Paul and Barnabas preached the word of His grace, because that is the only word by which both Jews and Gentiles can be saved on an equal basis. We are saved by grace alone through faith alone in Christ alone! Both Jews and Gentiles are saved in the same way!

And they stayed there in Iconium “**a long time**” preaching the Word but as the persecution grew, they moved on and we will see that as we read on.

VERSES 4-7

Here is a sign to move on, they want to kill Paul and Barnabas and thus, it would be foolish to continue on there in Iconium.

Thus, they move off the main roads and come to Lystra and Derbe, cities in the southern region of Lycaonia in the Roman province of Galatia.

Lystra was about 18 miles south of Iconium and was the home of Lois, Eunice and Timothy and it is possible that this family heard the Gospel and was saved during this visit by Paul and Barnabas. (Acts 16:1, II Timothy 1:5).

Derbe was located about 40 miles southeast of Lystra.

Is there historical evidence that Lystra and Derbe were both in the region of Lycaonia? William Ramsay demonstrated that between 37 and 72 A. D. they were, but only then. Which corresponds to the story here in Acts, when Paul was there.

This kind of accuracy persuaded Ramsay that the Biblical account was true, especially in an age when they were all thought to be fables and made-up stories.

Now, why doesn't Paul go into the Synagogue in Lystra as he normally did before he spoke to the Gentiles?

Because it took 10 male Jews to form a Synagogue and thus, it seems like there were very few Jews in this city.

And notice what they were doing there? We are told that “**. . . they were preaching the gospel there.**” Acts 14:7. In Lystra and Derbe the Gospel was being preached.

And I want you to clearly see that, “The apostles did not go into these cities to do miracles, and then to preach. Rather, it was the other way around: They went to preach; then sometimes there were healings.” (Boice) And we will see that as we read on.

VERSES 8-10

In this crowd of people that Paul was speaking to, exercising the gift of prophecy as he spoke forth the Word of God, he sees this man who was crippled from birth, never able to walk. Obviously, he was in this hopeless condition and God gives Paul the gift of discernment, as God showed Paul what this man needed in his life.

And then God gave to Paul the gift of faith to call out to this man and to have him stand and walk! And as he did, the gift of miracles was manifested. A combination of gifts of the Sprite are used here, not because Paul wanted them, but the Holy Spirit gave to Paul what He wanted Paul to do!

And so, as this man is healed by God, he is leaping for joy. Imagine, never able to walk and now he can! That is truly a miracle.

And yes, physically he was lame, but he was also spiritually lame, he needed to get saved.

Thus, as he listened to Paul not only was his physical body healed, but I also believe he was healed spiritually.

Imagine what the people were thinking at this point. You see, the people knew this man and his condition, and now they see him leaping and walking, what do you think their response will be? Let's read on and see!

VERSES 11-13

Did this miracle save these people? No, they just assumed that their gods had brought this miracle about and they called Paul Hermes, because he was the more talkative one and Barnabas they called Zeus!

Why did they do this? Yes, because that is all they knew but also, “There was a tradition in Lystra (recorded by the Roman poet Ovid, who died in A. D. 17) that the gods Zeus and Hermes once came to the earth incognito. When they arrived at Lystra and asked for food and lodging, everyone refused them. Finally, an old peasant named Philemon and his wife, Baucis, took them in. Their inhospitable neighbors were drowned in a flood sent by the vengeful gods. Philemon and Baucis, however, saw their humble cottage turned into a magnificent temple, where they served as priest and priestess. After their deaths, they were turned into two stately trees.”

Thus, they didn't want to make the same mistake their ancestors did thinking that once again these gods had come down to visit them and they would ignore them once again. Thus, they are honoring them, worshiping them.

Now let me ask you this question. After all Paul and Barnabas have been through, with all the persecution and threats that they faced, what was the most dangerous time for them on this first missionary journey?

I don't think it was the *PERSECUTION*, but it was the *PRAISE!* The worship of Paul and Barnabas could have destroyed their work much faster than the persecution! Not the warring against them but the worshipping of them!

That is also true for us, don't let the praise of people towards you go to your head, you are a man and not a god! God will not share His glory with anyone! Thus, humble yourself in the sight of the Lord and He will lift you up!

There's a story about a man who, leaving church one Sunday, complained about the music. "I didn't like the hymns you chose today," he said.

The pastor simply replied, "That's OK; we weren't singing them for you."

If you think that God needs you, you are sadly mistaken. He will use you and me for His glory, but He does not have to! We need to have that perspective because if we are drawing people to ourselves instead of the Lord, look out!

And here in Lystra, not only were the people worshiping Paul and Barnabas, but we are told, "**Then the priest of Zeus, whose temple was in front of their city, brought oxen and garlands to the gates, intending to sacrifice with the multitudes.**" Acts 14:13.

Now we see that the priest of Zeus wants to sacrifice unto them. Not sacrifice them!

Up to this point I don't believe they understood what was being said because they spoke in the Lycaonian language. But as they are watching what is going on, I think they notice something is wrong and notice how they responded!

VERSES 14-18

Don't miss the point here. How easy it would have been for them to accept this worship and, in their minds, use it as a basis to teach them the truth. We don't try to trick people into the faith, that is not the way that God wants us to represent Him!

Paul makes that very point in II Corinthians 4:1-2 when he wrote, **“Therefore, since we have this ministry, as we have received mercy, we do not lose heart. But we have renounced the hidden things of shame, not walking in craftiness nor handling the word of God deceitfully, but by manifestation of the truth commending ourselves to every man’s conscience in the sight of God.”**

We are not to use the Word of God deceitfully but speak forth the truths of God found in the Word of God.

Paul also spoke of this in I Thessalonians 2:1-5. He wrote, **“For you yourselves know, brethren, that our coming to you was not in vain. But even after we had suffered before and were spitefully treated at Philippi, as you know, we were bold in our God to speak to you the gospel of God in much conflict. For our exhortation did not come from error or uncleanness, nor was it in deceit. But as we have been approved by God to be entrusted with the gospel, even so we speak, not as pleasing men, but God who tests our hearts. For neither at any time did we use flattering words, as you know, nor a cloak for covetousness - God is witness.”**

Again, they shared the Word of God without any deceit or trickery. They did not use flattering words to catch them. They spoke forth the Word of truth and they were not looking for any recognition as they did, but they wanted to glorify the Lord in all that they said and did! He got the praise; the Lord got the worship and not man and that is the way it is to be!

Here we see Paul and Barnabas come against what they were doing and boldly told the people that the gods of Lystra were *VANITIES*, they were *EMPTY*, they were *WORTHLESS!*

What a great lesson for us to learn and follow. Paul and Barnabas pointed the people away from worshipping them and to worship God.

You see, we are of like passions, we are the same, we have the same struggles, we are not God and thus, we don't deserve worship.

The fact of the matter is that there is only one true and living God who created all things and thus, every other religion, every other god, every other idol, is worthless, fruitless, it can't help you, but the Lord can!

In our more advanced society we look at these things these people worshipped, their gods, their idols, and we laugh at their simplicity.

And yet, anything that is more important to you than the Lord is an idol to you, be it your job, a car, your spouse, whatever.

And as Psalm 115:8 says, "**Those who make them are like them; So is everyone who trusts in them.**" Let's get our priorities right and worship the true and living God!

And granted, they did not have the Scriptures, but they did have nature itself and nature declares the glory of God, that there is a God.

You see, God gave them rain and bountiful harvests. God placed in their heart a moral law, what was right and what was wrong, (Romans 2:13-15).

Thus, there is no excuse as Romans 1:20-25 tells us, **“For since the creation of the world His invisible attributes are clearly seen, being understood by the things that are made, even His eternal power and Godhead, so that they are without excuse, because, although they knew God, they did not glorify Him as God, nor were thankful, but became futile in their thoughts, and their foolish hearts were darkened. Professing to be wise, they became fools, and changed the glory of the incorruptible God into an image made like corruptible man - and birds and four-footed animals and creeping things. Therefore God also gave them up to uncleanness, in the lusts of their hearts, to dishonor their bodies among themselves, who exchanged the truth of God for the lie, and worshiped and served the creature rather than the Creator, who is blessed forever. Amen.”**

Now, in saying that, as we read in Acts 14:16, which says, **“who in bygone generations allowed all nations to walk in their own ways”** it seems to be saying that God will not judge the heathen who lived before the Apostolic Age.

Again, context and read what is said after this. In Acts 14:17 we are told, **“Nevertheless He did not leave Himself without witness, in that He did good, gave us rain from heaven and fruitful seasons, filling our hearts with food and gladness.”**

There was that general revelation and not only that, God had placed in their hearts, their consciousness, what is right and what is wrong. So they were without excuse. God had His witness, they just refused to see and respond to it!

Now after they heard all this, the crowds still had to be restrained from worshipping Paul and Barnabas.

That is the heart of humility on Paul’s and Barnabas’s part, that even though the crowds wanted to exalt them, they pointed them back to God and refused their worship!

And if that is not bad enough, as God is working, so too is Satan. Look at what happens next, it will rock your world – literally!

VERSES 19-20

As you read this story it seems that these Jews from Antioch and Iconium were not just there by accident, but they traveled there specifically to come against Paul and Barnabas. That meant they traveled some one hundred miles just to attack them!

And they get the crowds worked up and they stoned Paul and dragged him out of the city and left him for dead.

Isn't that interesting. One minute they want to worship them as god's and offer sacrifices to them and the next, they want to put them to death.

Man is very fickle. Think about sports. You have a quarterback who is doing well and then he has a few games where he is not doing well. One minute they are praising him and the next, they are trading him. That is man, very fickle!

And this stoning that we see here, I think we see this spoken of in II Corinthians 11:25 where Paul wrote, of some of the things he encountered in his life, "**Three times I was beaten with rods; once I was stoned; three times I was shipwrecked; a night and a day I have been in the deep.**"

And as Paul laid out in the streets dead, the other disciples gathered around him. I am sure great sadness filled their lives and then Paul got up, brushed off the dirt and went back into the city he was just stoned in and once again spoke of the Good News of Jesus Christ.

It is hard to keep a good man down! You just can't stop someone like this where their faith is so real, so strong nothing will stop them! It is as Paul said in Ephesians 5:15-16, "**See then that you walk circumspectly, not as fools but as wise, redeeming the time, because the days are evil.**"

So not only were the believers encouraged by the faith of Paul, but I am sure others saw it as well!

Now here is the big question that many are wondering about. Did Paul really die? It would seem that he did because in his second letter to the Corinthians, about fourteen years after this event, Paul tells us in II Corinthians 12:2-4, "**I know a man in Christ who fourteen years ago - whether in the body I do not know, or whether out of the body I do not know, God knows - such a one was caught up to the third heaven. And I know such a man - whether in the body or out of the body I do not know, God knows - how he was caught up into Paradise and heard inexpressible words, which it is not lawful for a man to utter.**"

It is possible that Paul is speaking of this time, and he himself wasn't sure if he was dead or not, but he was taken into the third heaven, and it was very real.

Now what is this third heaven all about. Well, first of all, the first heaven is where the birds fly, the atmosphere; the second heaven is where the stars and planets are; and the third heaven, is the dwelling place of God. And when he was there he heard things that he couldn't even tell us, words couldn't describe them!

Now in saying that, it doesn't stop people from writing books about dying and going to heaven. And they have so much to say about heaven even though Paul could not even say one thing because it would have taken away from its beauty!

There is a book called, *Heaven is for Real* and it is an account of a three-year-old boy who believes he went to Heaven. The story is told by the boy's father who is an evangelical pastor and it was written in 2010 and made the New York Times Best-Sellers list. Many Christians have read this book and feel it is great, encouraging, it blessed them. I find that interesting, I wonder if they feel the same way about the Word of God?

Again, I am not saying that this boy did not experience something, but what I am saying is that this is just a false experience; it is not of God because it contradicts the Word of God! That has to be our key, our plume line you might say to determine what is right and what is wrong! We are told,

That experience took place when three-year-old Colton was undergoing emergency surgery for a ruptured appendix. Not too long afterward, he told his parents that he saw them praying for him outside the operating room. When they asked how he knew what they had been doing he said, "Cause I could see you. . . . I went up out of my body and I was looking down and I could see the doctor working on my body. [Scripture tells us that death takes place when the spirit vacates the body. Yet there was no medical report of a clinical death during Colton's surgery.] And I saw you and Mommy. You were in a little room by yourself, praying; and Mommy was in a different room, and she was praying and talking on the phone" (pp. xx-xxi). The accuracy of Colton's disclosure rocked his parents to the core. But that was just the beginning of revelations that far and away defy natural explanations.

Colton's other revelations included: angels singing "Jesus Loves Me" to him; his sitting on Jesus' lap; meeting John the Baptist and the angel Gabriel; petting Jesus' rainbow-colored horse; his descriptions of Jesus' wounds and attire, including a crown with a pink diamond that Jesus wore; the prevalence of kids in Heaven; his description of everyone there having wings like the angels - all except Jesus, that is; his being recognized by his great grandfather, who died decades before Colton was born; and the description of God as "really, really big."

Although most of Colton's observations in Heaven are not outside the realm of possibility of what *could* take place there, they are nevertheless extra-biblical insights and information, some being more problematic than others.

For example, Colton explains that "Everyone kind of looks like angels in heaven," sporting wings (the size of which are dependent on the individual's size) and a halo. Since the resurrection of believers' transformed physical bodies has yet to take place, their form now in Heaven must lack physical attributes. Hence the need for wings of whatever size makes no sense. Moreover, other than the descriptive visions of the heavenly creatures known as cherubim and seraphim and the decorative designs in the Temple and upon the Mercy Seat, angels that appear to humanity are never described as having wings.

Many supporters of the book claim that any and all objections pale in the face of the supernatural knowledge that Colton reveals - things that were humanly impossible for him to know. For example, he said that he had met his other sister in Heaven. When told by his mother that Cassie was his only sister, his shocking response was, "No. . . . I have two sisters. You had a baby die in your tummy, didn't you?" (p. 94). Colton had never been told of the "painful episode" of the miscarriage, and his parents never knew the gender of the fetus. Colton added, "In heaven, this little girl ran up to me, and she wouldn't stop hugging me. . . ."

She said she just can't wait for you and Daddy to get to heaven" (p. 96). That revelation seemed to be the most convincing for Colton's parents that their son had indeed visited Heaven: "We had wanted to believe that our unborn child had gone to heaven. Even though the Bible is largely silent on this point, we had accepted it on faith. But now, we had an eyewitness: a daughter we had never met was waiting eagerly for us in eternity" (p. 97).

Was Colton truly an *eyewitness* in Heaven to everything he described? Much of it is quite mindboggling, notwithstanding the fact that *all of it* is extra-biblical. Yet it provides alleged insights about Heaven; e.g., a girl dies as a fetus, grows into a little girl in heaven, and then is eagerly awaiting her parents' arrival. What if one or both parents reject the gospel? Would there then be disappointment in a place of perfect bliss? . . .

At the time and in the years following Colton's experience, his dad was very interested in having him describe Jesus. He wrote that "as a pastor, I wound up spending a lot of time at hospitals, in Christian bookstores, and at other churches - all places where there are lots of drawings and paintings of Christ. . . . When we came across a picture of Jesus we'd ask Colton, 'What about this one? Is that what Jesus looks like?'" (p. 93).

Time after time, Colton would reject the dozens of misrepresentations. Then, nearly three years after Colton's surgery, he was shown a portrait of Jesus painted by a young girl named Akiane, who also claims to have visited Heaven beginning at the age of four. Colton's reaction was, "Dad, that one's right." His confirmation convinced his father: "Knowing how many pictures Colton had rejected, Sonja [his mother] and I finally felt that in Akiane's portrait, we'd seen the face of Jesus. Or at least a startling likeness" (p. 145).

Also, there is the book that came out, *The Boy Who Came Back From Heaven*, that has now been removed from the bookstores because the boy who said he came back, he didn't even go there! Listen carefully,

Lifeway has been selling *The Boy Who Came Back From Heaven* for many years now. It is part of the trifecta of books on "heavenly tourism" that Lifeway has sold and has promoted, along with **90 Minutes in Heaven** and **Heaven is for Real**. The co-author of *The Boy Who Came Back From Heaven* – the boy himself – has written an open letter to Lifeway and admonished them for not holding to the sufficiency of Scripture, and has recanted his tale. For those who may not be familiar with of *The Boy Who Came Back From Heaven*, the publisher's description is as follows:

"In 2004, Kevin Malarkey and his six-year-old son, Alex, suffered a horrific car accident. The impact from the crash paralyzed Alex—and medically speaking, it was unlikely that he could survive. 'I think Alex has gone to be with Jesus,' a friend told the stricken dad. But two months later, Alex awoke from a coma with an incredible story to share. Of events at the accident scene and in the hospital while he was unconscious. Of the angels that took him through the gates of heaven itself. Of the unearthly music that sounded just 'terrible' to a six-year-old. And, most amazing of all . . . Of meeting and talking to Jesus. 'The Boy Who Came Back from Heaven' is the true story of an ordinary boy's most extraordinary journey. As you see heaven and earth through Alex's eyes, you'll come away with new insights on miracles, life beyond this world, and the power of a father's love."

- <https://goo.gl/Y287Rm>

It sounds so good, but it is not true. We are told,

The decision to pull the book comes after Alex Malarkey wrote an open letter to retailer LifeWay and others who sell Christian books and religious materials. It was published this week on the Pulpit and Pen Website.

“I did not die. I did not go to Heaven,” Alex wrote. He continued, “I said I went to heaven because I thought it would get me attention. When I made the claims that I did, I had never read the Bible. People have profited from lies, and continue to. They should read the Bible, which is enough. The Bible is the only source of truth. Anything written by man cannot be infallible.”

He concluded, “Those who market these materials must be called to repent and hold the Bible as enough.”

- <https://goo.gl/LYVwGC>

Here’s the thing, if God is silent on something, we must be careful not to add to God’s Word or take away from God’s Word. Satan is a master deceiver as I have said and if something does not line up with God’s Word, then it is not of God.

In one part of this book, *Heaven is for Real*, Colton describes Jesus helping him with his homework in Heaven. I hope we don’t have homework in Heaven, I thought I was done with that! Heaven is a place of worship, the worship of God not a place of homework.

If you want to know what truth is, then just read the Bible!

Now, back to our story. We are told that the next day Paul and Barnabas travel to Derbe, about 40 miles southeast of Lystra and not an easy trip especially when you were just stoned and left for dead the day before!

VERSES 21-22

As they finished in Derbe they revisited the three cities they just came from; Lystra, Iconium and Antioch, and now we see the fruit of their labors, there were believers in these cities and as Paul shared the things that happened to him it strengthened them.

Too often we present the Christian life as a tip-toe through the tulips when in reality; it is a battle we are in.

Thus, we need to tell the brethren to not give up, to press on in this warfare that is coming against the kingdom of God. There will be hardships and persecution but don't let them move you from the course that God has set for you!

It is as Paul said to Timothy, "**You therefore must endure hardship as a good soldier of Jesus Christ. . . Yes, and all who desire to live godly in Christ Jesus will suffer persecution.**" II Timothy 2:3, 3:12.

This is, for many, a forgotten message today. They consider any kind of tribulation completely counter-productive to Christian living, failing to note the significant place suffering has in God's plan.

Things happen in our lives to test our faith, to draw us closer to God, to be a witness to others and-so-on. Things don't happen for no reason!

VERSE 23

Please understand that Paul did not leave these believers on their own but appointed elders to help them to grow, to keep them on the right course and to spread the Good News.

How can that be when these were new believers? I like what Boice said, “The apostles had left behind only a tiny core of believers, and these had hardly been taught anything, since the apostles had been there at best for only a few weeks. How could this little group survive? It survived because the work was actually being done by God. The church was his church.”

And Paul “**appointed elders in every church.**” Now some say that the elders run the church and there really is no shepherd. I disagree. Notice that it says elders in every church and if you compare Titus 1:5 and Titus 1:7, you will see that “elder” and “bishop” (overseer) refer to the same office, and both are equivalent to “pastor” (shepherd).

I truly believe this is one shepherd and the elders are there to support the pastor or shepherd.

But again, how could Paul leave them when they were so young in the faith? He did not leave them alone as Bruce tells us, “It has more than once been pointed out that more recent missionary policy would have thought it dangerously idealistic to recognize converts of only a few weeks’ standing as leaders in their churches; perhaps Paul and Barnabas were more conscious of the presence and power of the Holy Spirit in the believing communities.”

Exactly! Notice again what we are told, “**. . . they commended them to the Lord in whom they had believed.**” The Lord was overseeing them, and I love that.

And let’s face it, in the end, they can only trust in God’s ability to keep these churches healthy, having commended them to the Lord. It was in the Lord they had believed, not in Paul or Barnabas or the elders. The church belongs to Jesus. And I rest in that, this is His church not mine!

VERSES 24-28

On the continent, they returned pretty much the same way they came. They did not stop on the island of Cyprus, but sailed to Antioch, returning to their home congregation.

And as Paul's first missionary journey comes to a close, they traveled some 700 miles by land and some 500 miles by sea, and now they returned to the church in Antioch in Caesarea, the church that sent them out on this journey.

Then they shared with them all that God had done, how He opened the door to the Gentiles, which will become an issue for believing Jews as we come to Acts chapter 15 and we will see that next time.

And they are not only sharing these things, but they are also being refreshed, staying in Antioch for maybe 1 to 2 years before beginning their second missionary journey!

And, as we will see when we get to it, there is some controversy on who is going and who is not. And we will cover that next time when we get to Acts chapter 15.

As you read these stories you can see the personal commitment of Paul and Barnabas as they withstood all kinds of persecution, troubles, difficulties. But none of that moved them from the course that God has set for them because they kept their eyes on Jesus!

Winston Churchill spoke of commitment to the work as he said,

It is not the critic who counts, not the man who points out how the strong man stumbled or where the doer of deeds could have done them better. The credit belongs to the man who is actually in the arena, whose face is marred by dust and sweat and blood, who strives valiantly, who errs and comes short again and again, who knows the great enthusiasms, the great devotions, and spends himself in a worthy cause, who at the best knows in the end the triumph of high achievement, and who at the worst, if he fails, at least fails while daring greatly, so that his place shall never be with those cold and timid souls who know neither victory nor defeat.

- John Claypool, *The Preaching Event*, pp. 61-62

And it can and should be asked of each follower of Jesus, “What will it take for you to back down from doing God’s will? What kind of temptation or obstacle or opposition will do it?” Nothing stopped Jesus from doing God’s will on our behalf; as we look to Him, we won’t be stopped either.

Paul put it like this in Philippians 3:12-14, **“Not that I have already attained, or am already perfected; but I press on, that I may lay hold of that for which Christ Jesus has also laid hold of me. Brethren, I do not count myself to have apprehended; but one thing I do, forgetting those things which are behind and reaching forward to those things which are ahead, I press toward the goal for the prize of the upward call of God in Christ Jesus.”**

Can we press on towards that upward calling that God has for our lives as we look to Jesus Christ, the Author and Finisher of our faith? I hope we can because there is great reward as we do. I am not saying that it is easy, but the rewards are out of this world! Never forget that!

PRESS ON!