

Acts 14:21-28

Christ's Church Puts Down Roots

Hello, everyone with us here in person at Open Door Chapel and those worshipping together online. It's nice to share God's word with you again today, my first time this year. I'd like to continue in the journey through the book of Acts which we've been on for years now. I'm enjoying looking at these old stories at an unhurried pace. On one hand, listening to the *fresh* message God is giving to us as one of His churches today, helps us move ahead. Yet on the other, we do this while holding close His *unchanging* word, always true across the centuries.

In Acts 14 Paul and Barnabas reach the end of their first missionary journey. In v. 21 we read that they "preached the good news in the city of Derbe. They won large numbers of followers." The last stop on their journey is in today's southern Turkey, as you probably recall. Then they begin going back through the places they have been, revisiting them to strengthen the new believers in Christ there. Eventually they return to their starting point. They are able to announce that the Gospel message of Jesus is being received, though through sometimes fierce opposition. Christ's Church is putting down roots.

Today's story is about missionary work, as so many in the book of Acts are. You may be thinking, "This may be helpful for missionaries, but I'm not a missionary. What about me?" There's a problem in that question. It shows a basic misunderstanding of what it means to be a Christian. We may not realize it from the beginning of our life of faith, but the Bible teaches one thing very clearly: we are not only saved so that we will have a good life. God's great hope for you is not only your salvation and happiness. The God who saves us also wants to use us to give the word of new life in Christ to other people, who also need it. We are all put here to be missionaries in the most basic sense.

There are people whom God intends to reach with His saving love through you. You may understand those particular people better than anyone else in the world, just by being in a position to know them as their family member, friend, or coworker. You may be able to communicate the Gospel of Christ through the way you live in front of them every day, and that is a much more powerful witness than a sermon preached from a pulpit or words written in a book, very often.

You have an important role to play in God's salvation story. Who are the people to whom God is sending you now? Whom are you here to serve, today, this week, this year, beyond that? Try making those questions a regular part of your prayer life. It will be fascinating and maybe surprising to see what particular answers the Lord gives you. Each will open the way to a unique and fresh work of God.

Paul and Barnabas "won large numbers of followers," v. 21 tells us. Some translations say they won "disciples." It does not say "converts." There's an important difference between "followers" or "disciples" and "converts." Do you see

it? A person can see the truth of the message of Christ and decide to accept it. Wonderful! Praise God for that crucial first turning point!

But it's just the beginning! God's plan for you and me and each person is not just for us to get our sins forgiven and make sure we have our ticket to heaven ("fire insurance," some call it). He intends to teach and form us day by day into the people that He had in His best dreams for us when He created us in the first place. We can only be transformed in that way by walking close beside Him. Spiritual maturity, or a Christ-like character, is a key goal He has for our lives. We can only gain that through our own *experience* in following Him. Day by day, we learn that He is with us through the good times and bad, all the way throughout our lives in this world and beyond.

Let's not be satisfied with conversion, either in ourselves or the people we can help follow Jesus along with us. Let's commit ourselves to living our whole lives knowing Jesus Christ in fuller and fuller ways by actively following Him on the path of faith.

It is an amazing thing that Paul and Barnabas go back to the places they have been, after what has happened there. To review, in Lystra, people have thrown stones at Paul and hurt him so badly that they thought he was dead (14:19). In Iconium, people have planned to kill Paul and Barnabas by stoning, though they found out about it and escaped. In Pisidian Antioch, they have been kicked out of the city (13:50). So when they intentionally return to these same places, they are showing remarkable courage.

That is a mark of the presence of God in the heart of His people, which we see over and over in the Bible. If these men don't know deep in their souls that God is with them, guiding and protecting, then choosing to place their lives in danger again just makes no sense. But they believe they are following their Lord. Also, they probably know or at least sense that the people they have led into this faith will also face opposition and danger in the future for living as Christ-followers. The missionaries want to demonstrate that they are not asking people to do something that they themselves would not be willing to do because of the trouble it could bring.

So as v. 22 describes, they "helped the believers gain strength." The New King James Version says they were "strengthening the souls of the disciples." This word for *strengthening* is used when we read about missionaries doing basically the same thing in Acts 15 and 18 at churches which had already been planted.

If you have been a Christian for a long time, you can probably look back on the early days of your walk with Christ and see a difference between your life of faith then and now. People who have just started their faith journey can tend to waver. A little challenge to their faith can shock them. The people they have had as friends may not like all the changes they see in them and try to influence them not to live as a Christian. Individuals they have looked up to and trusted may tell them that they are believing something strange. New disciples of Christ may see the price they will have to pay in social acceptance and feel like they are salmon swimming against the current of the stream.

All this can tempt them to go back to their old way of life. But Paul and Barnabas tell the new Christians in today's story the truth that we need to keep with us always, as well. That is, there is no danger as great as losing their close walk with Christ. There is no advantage as great as keeping their hold on His hand. Whatever trials may come their way, God will provide them the strength to pass through them. And whatever their losses may be, their Lord will give them far greater rewards in their place.

In Acts 14:22b we see one thing the missionaries say to strengthen the new believers. Paul and Barnabas talk to them honestly, not as religious sales people trying to pump up their numbers of converts. They say, "We must go through many hard times to enter God's kingdom."

Yes. God has decided it will be that way. The plan of Almighty God will not be changed. Many people approach religion as a way to avoiding pain and suffering. Some believe that if you really see things in just the right way, you can have a life without too much trouble. That is the belief, or at least hope, at the center of everything for them. But you can't actually find that teaching in the Christian faith, if you look at the Bible honestly. In fact, God clearly promises that we will have many difficulties in life. In II Timothy 3:11-12, Paul writes to Timothy about the events of the missionary journey he is completing in Acts 14.

You know that I was treated badly. You know that I suffered greatly. You know what kinds of things happened to me in Antioch, Iconium and Lystra. You know how badly I have been treated. But the Lord saved me from all of my troubles. In fact, everyone who wants to live a godly life in Christ Jesus will be treated badly.

Well, that doesn't sound like very good news, does it. So why would we even follow Christ if it is going to lead to trouble?

God gives us a number of answers to this question in the Bible. There are of course the basic truths that (1) we owe our lives to God for creating us in the first place, and (2) Jesus' dying for us saves us from the natural result of the sins we have all committed—God's righteous anger and hell. But even beyond those teachings, we can look at our own lives and think of the times when we have grown the most as human beings. Were they times when things were going nicely, with no special difficulties? It seems clear when you listen to most people talk about their lives, that we humans often learn, grow, and become much more through our struggles, our pain, the trials of life.

We are so quick to avoid pain at every opportunity, make the goal of our life always finding the path of least resistance, that we will rarely seek difficulty on our own. But it will come to us anyway, won't it. Trouble has a way of finding us, as long as we are human beings in this world. You may have heard the saying that the only two certain things in life are death and taxes. Well, we could also add one, couldn't we? It's certain that along with the good times, times of trouble will come from time to time—not only when we have to pay taxes and die someday.

When Paul writes about “going through many hard times,” he apparently is especially thinking of being persecuted because of our faith in Christ. The original Greek word here does not limit the meaning to persecution, though many in Bible times and since then have gone through that type of trial. Lots of our brothers and sisters in Iran, Nigeria, China, North Korea, and other places receive persecution for their faith. We have the job of praying for them.

Yet he and all of us know that suffering is not limited to religious persecution. For instance, ask anyone who is getting old. Aging is not for the faint of heart, as they say.

We may tend to think that our particular troubles are especially difficult. But consider the following quotes (Larson, p. 114).

“I’m in difficulty, both summer and winter, about my salary.”—an Egyptian in 256 B.C.

“The first of June and nothing done by the Senate!”—Cicero, 38 B.C.

“Who has not seen with his own eyes the present spirit which forces up the price of commodities to such a degree that human language cannot find words to express the transaction?”—Diocletian, A.D. 301

“Athletics have become professionalized.”—Socrates, 402 B.C.¹

And even for Jesus Christ, there was the cross before the crown. Of course, our crosses and crowns will not be the same as His. He is the only Savior and King. But He says that those who follow Him can expect the same *type* of thing to happen in our lives, as we walk in His footsteps.

Hard times are part of life, and God knows this. So He sets as His highest hopes for us not lives of great ease and comfort but those with all the power we need to *go through* times of adversity with an unchanging inner strength. That’s what the author of Romans 5:3b-5a means in writing, “We are full of joy even when we suffer. We know that our suffering gives us the strength to go on. The strength to go on produces character. Character produces hope. And hope will never let us down.”

Yes. That is our Lord’s promise to us. So let’s trust Him to take us through the hard times that lie before us, along with the easy and fun times. Let’s not try in vain to *escape* them, but willingly *go through* them with courage, strength, and peace, as He leads us. Let’s be there for each other to celebrate the good times. Let’s also be there to suffer together and support and encourage each other when the bad times roll around. I’ve seen this church do this many times. It’s encouraging to see. May we continue and learn to do this more and more under the leadership of God’s Spirit.

Continuing the story, in v. 23 “Paul and Barnabas appointed elders for them in each church. The elders had trusted in the Lord. Paul and Barnabas prayed and fasted. They placed the elders in the Lord’s care.” God’s way of organizing His churches involves having “elders . . . in each church.” Many Bible teachers understand the New Testament words *elders*, *bishops*, and *presbyters* to mean basically the same thing and be used in pretty much the same way. Some scholars

note that it tends to be *elder* in Jewish contexts and *bishop* in non-Jewish (especially Greek or Roman). It's not "elder" but "elders" in 14:23. God is appointing leaders, entrusting them to *share* in the work.

They "... placed the elders in the Lord's care." The verb translated "placed" has the image of simply setting something before someone. It could, for example, be placing food on a table, offering it to the people who will receive it. We did something like this last November in Pastor Lee's installation ceremony. We set Him apart, placed him before the Lord for the special service God has put him here to do. But don't worry, Pastor Lee, I don't think God is planning on eating you, and we're not, either!

From this verse we learn that God designs His churches so that they have leaders. We more often call them pastors and deacons in Baptist churches. The members are to serve under the leadership of the people God puts there, as they are to serve under His (the Lord's) leadership. This is different from a Christian life that is unconnected from a church. That's why Hebrews 10:25 tells us, "Let us not give up meeting together. Some are in the habit of doing this. Instead, let us cheer each other up with words of hope. Let us do it all the more as you see the day coming when Christ will return." You might be able to worship in your own home, and hear a great sermon online each week. You might feel closer to God in nature, His beautiful creation, than you do in a building like this one. Worshiping outside the church might even leave you feeling satisfied, that your spiritual needs are being met.

But, among other problems, that kind of "Christian life" does not put you under the leadership of a pastor. A leader of a true New Testament church will guide you to find and actively and consistently use your spiritual gift or gifts in service to God and others. Church leaders will encourage you ("[help you] gain strength," as v. 22 puts it). You won't get that by yourself. And even if you have a nice small group of people to meet with, say in your home, in many cases your leaders may have little or no training or experience. If you "run off the rails" in your understanding of God's word, you may have no one to point it out to you. You don't have to do the hard work of getting to know a whole community of people and cooperating with them. It may be much more time-efficient and convenient to stay only loosely or barely connected with God's Church. But the meaning is far less, and that is not God's plan for you, according to His word.

At end of their first journey, Paul and Barnabas have a growing number of brothers and sisters in Christ who will be together with those of other places. They will be in heaven with God and each other throughout eternity. They have been there for nearly 2,000 years now (in years as we count them in our world) and are just getting started. The relationships we have with our brothers and sisters here are part of the same large, large family of God. We may as well get used to each other as much as we can now because we are going to be together for a long, long time—forever!

Paul and Barnabas have finished their journey (v. 26). It has probably taken them about a year. In v. 27 we read how the missionary team reports to their sending church on how the work has progressed. It is naturally of great interest not

only to the people in that church, but also to the Christian Church as a whole, including the leaders in Jerusalem. The next part of the book of Acts will describe how the Church of Jesus Christ deals with the dramatic change that is taking place. It is transforming from a group tightly focused on the special relationship between God and the people of Israel to one that is all about God's saving love for every people group around the world.

Finally, v. 28, "And they stayed there a long time with the believers." It doesn't say they just retire and spend their remaining days playing golf and hanging out with their buddies. They don't set aside their gifts, calling, training, preparation, or experience. They will continue to use these in many ways in the days ahead, at God's direction, in the times and ways that He shows them are right. God has saved them for a reason. He still has His purposes in mind and many things for them to do as long as they remain alive in this world.

So though the first missionary journey has concluded, the greater work of spreading Christ's message is just beginning. And the key point for us is that it is continuing even today, through you and me and all God's people. He keeps doing His work of salvation through all who are willing to cooperate with Him in living out the Gospel and proclaiming it to the people around us. To do that well, we are going to need His help. So let's pray to Him now.

Lord, it is beautiful to see how you have taken care of your people, the Church, throughout the centuries. Even in the face of opposition, danger, and suffering, you have protected, supported, guided, and richly blessed each family of faith in countless places around the world. As we look at what you have done and how you continue to work in *our* church today, help us to take courage. Help us put down deep roots. Grow us strong. Make us confident in you, unafraid to face challenges that will come our way—because you hold us in your wise and powerful hands. In Christ Jesus' name, amen.

References

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Endnote

¹This is likely a summary of Socrates' words rather than a direct quotation. Those who are interested in the details of this discussion may see, for example, Plato's *Republic* and *Athletics, gymnastics, and agōn in Plato* (2020, Parnassos Press), edited by Heather L. Reid, Mark Ralkowski, and Coleen P. Zoller.

