

Key:

Purple – Introduction, Conclusion, Main Points, and Sermon Thread

Blue – Explanation/Exposition

Red – Application

Green – Illustration

Brown – Quotation

Yellow – Sermon Notes

## Left for Dead in Lystra

Acts 14:1–28

Let's take our Bibles together and turn to Acts 14:1–28, as we continue our verse by verse series through the book of Acts.

Here's the key word for us today. Everyone listening? This word if you embrace it and love it and consider it as essential to your Christian life will serve you well. Here's the word—*Endurance*. *Endurance*. Turn to your neighbor right now and say, "Endurance." That's what we're going after in our passage this morning.

Have you ever asked yourself: "How much would I be willing to endure for my Savior, Jesus Christ? How much?" "If someone insulted me, would I abandon Christ? If someone threatened me, would I renounce my faith? If someone started to harass me or started beating me... If someone started whipping me or pummeling me or started throwing stones at me, would I endure through that in the power of the Holy Spirit?" "Or would I forsake my Lord and Savior in an act of self-preservation?"

My fear is that a lot of people who call themselves "Christians" would say in a moment of persecution, "I didn't sign up for this; I'm out of here." And they would renounce Christ. My fear is that a lot of "Christians," when they find out that Christianity isn't "vote for Jesus and all your wildest dreams will come true"... when they find out that Christianity isn't just "a walk in the park" like they were promised, they get disillusioned. They get discouraged. And instead of pressing through those trials and pain and suffering (which Jesus promised us, by the way), they bail.

Or they retreat to a life of ease and comfort. They close themselves off from the world and from any potentially difficult relationships, thereby blocking any potential fruitfulness. But is that what we were put on this earth for? Is that what God wants from us?

These are good questions to ask ourselves, because the biblical model that is presented to us in the book of Acts is that Christians suffer. Forget what that TV Evangelist told you. An essential aspect of the Christian life is *endurance*. Or here's another word—*perseverance*. But here's the good news about endurance. As we endure, as we persevere through the difficult things in the world, God produces fruit in our lives.<sup>1</sup> That's his pattern. God calls. God sends. Opposition hits. We persevere through that opposition and then there's fruit.

So what are some things that we are going to have to endure as followers of Jesus Christ? I'll give you three things today from the text.

But before I get to that, let's set the context for Acts 14. As many of you know, our passage today continues Paul and Barnabas's first missionary journey through part of the first century Roman Empire. Here's a quick review of Chapter 13. Paul and Barnabas (and John-Mark) leave from the city of Antioch.<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup> BASIL THE GREAT: "God does rescue the holy from affliction, but he does so not by rendering them untested but by blessing them with endurance." Quoted in Martin and Smith, eds., *Acts*, ACCS, 179.

<sup>2</sup> Sproul, *Acts*, 251–2: "One of those scholars, distinguished for his historical expertise, was the British Sir William Ramsay. Ramsay decided to embark on a journey that followed the biblical record of Paul's missionary journeys and wherever possible to do archaeological research pertaining to the accuracy of the details supplied by Luke. Ramsay was a skeptic. He agreed with the liberal viewpoint that Luke's book had been filled with error, but everywhere he went, every time he turned over a shovel of dirt, his findings verified the details Luke had included in both his Gospel and in Acts. When Ramsay came in his journey to the places noted in this particular passage, he found the boundary marker between Derbe and Lystra, and indeed the boundary marker had the two cities in different provinces. However, upon further examination he found that at various times in antiquity the boundaries of those provinces



The First Part of Paul's First Missionary Journey<sup>3</sup>

The church prays for them and sends them out in the power of the Holy Spirit. They travel first to Cyprus and preach the gospel there. They plant churches. People get saved. And they come face to face with a magician who opposes them, some sorcerer guy named Elymas Bar-Jesus. And Paul gives him a Holy Spirit smack-down. If only all opposition was defeated that easily.

And after overcoming that opposition, God unleashes even more fruitfulness on their mission. Then these missionaries travel by sea to the port of Perga in Pamphylia. And it was there that the work got too difficult for John-Mark and he heads home to Jerusalem. John-Mark hasn't yet learned the discipline of endurance. We'll come back to him later.

But Paul and Barnabas soldier on and they travel by foot over treacherous terrain to Pisidian Antioch. And there, once again they preached the gospel, and people get saved! And nothing bad happens to them whatsoever, right? No. Paul and Barnabas get opposed. They get reviled. Look at **Acts 13:50**. A persecution gets stirred up against them in the city and they get driven out of the district. **If you tell people about Jesus, nothing bad will ever happen to you, right? No, that's not true.**

But look at the fruit in **verse 52**, "And the disciples were filled with joy and with the Holy Spirit." God calls. God sends. Opposition hits. We endure through that opposition. And then there's fruit.

Well, here we go again in **Acts 14**. And we'll see that same pattern again. Watch what happens here. Look at **verse 1**.

<sup>1</sup> Now<sup>4</sup> at Iconium<sup>5</sup> they entered together into the Jewish synagogue<sup>6</sup> and spoke in such a way that a great number<sup>7</sup> of both Jews and Greeks believed.

So they get thrown out of Pisidian Antioch. They were rejected. So what happens next? **"Hey Paul, maybe you should take a break, buddy. Maybe you should disappear for a while. Wait for the heat to die**

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changed, and, to his amazement, he discovered that between the years A.D. 37 and A.D. 72 Lystra and Derbe were in the same province—the exact province Luke mentions here in the text. At the end of his tour Ramsay said that he could not find a single error of historical reliability in the book of Acts, and he joined other later scholars who now call Luke the most reliable historian of the ancient world."

<sup>3</sup> Atlas taken from Logos Bible Study, Computer software. *Logos Bible Study Atlas* (Bellingham: Faithlife, LLC), June 7, 2025. Some geographical points added by author.

<sup>4</sup> Hughes, *Acts: The Church Afire*, Kindle Edition, chapter 22: "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 a beautiful plateau surrounded by fertile plains and verdant forests — Iconium."

<sup>5</sup> Bock, *Acts*, BECNT, 469: "Iconium was in the central part of what is now Konya province in Turkey, a rugged, somewhat isolated location on a plateau in the steppes of central Turkey... Strabo (*Geogr.* 12.6.1) describes the region aptly as cold, bare of trees, with scarcity of water, while the town is well settled."

<sup>6</sup> Polhill, *Acts*, NAC, 310: "Paul's usual method would be to go first to the synagogues. There was wisdom to this. For one, Paul never gave up on the Jews. There would be some who would hear gladly the message of Messiah's coming. Also there would be present in the synagogues Gentile proselytes and other Gentiles who believed in God and would be particularly open to the inclusive Christian message. Indeed, v. 1 attests to Paul and Barnabas having success among both these groups, Jews as well as Gentiles."

<sup>7</sup> Bock, *Acts*, BECNT, 469: "A large multitude (πολὸ πλῆθος, *poly plēthos*) of both Jews and Greeks believe. This is the only time this phrase appears in Acts out of three NT occurrences (Mark 3:7; Luke 23:27)."

**down a little bit.”** Nope, Paul and Barnabas shake the dust off their feet and go to the next town and keep preaching the gospel.<sup>8</sup>

Here’s the map again. Here’s where they go next.



**Iconium, Lystra, and Derbe<sup>9</sup>**

Paul and Barnabas travel about a hundred miles south of Pisidian Antioch to Iconium. And you can see on the map the other cities of Lycaonia are close by, Lystra and Derbe.<sup>10</sup> We’ll get to those cities in just a second.

And the Bible says as soon as they get to Iconium, they go into the synagogues and start preaching. And a great number of both Jews and Gentiles believe. Good things are happening again. People are getting saved. And we know by now, or at least we should know by now, that opposition is coming. It’s coming. When people start getting saved, it’s only a matter of time before Satan mobilizes his forces to impede gospel preaching.

**So verse 2,**

<sup>2</sup> But the unbelieving Jews stirred up the Gentiles<sup>11</sup> and poisoned their minds against the brothers.<sup>12</sup>

So what’s Paul going to do now? **“Hey Barnabas, let’s get out of here, man. These guys don’t like us.”** Is that what Paul’s going to do? Does that sound like Paul? Do you think Paul’s going to say, **“Whoa whoa. We don’t want to step on any toes here. We’ll just mosey on ... no harm, no foul... thanks for your time”?** Is that what they’re going to say?

**Look at verse 3.**

<sup>3</sup> So they remained for a long time,<sup>13</sup> speaking boldly for the Lord,<sup>14</sup>

**“O you don’t like what I’m saying? How bout I stick around and say it a little more boldly. How about I turn up the volume a bit.”<sup>15</sup>**

<sup>8</sup> Polhill, *Acts*, NAC, 309–10: “It was no easy journey. Iconium was some ninety miles southeast of Antioch by the Sebastian way, the main route that connected Ephesus with Syria and Mesopotamia. Iconium was located on a plateau 3,370 feet in elevation.”

<sup>9</sup> Atlas taken from Logos Bible Study, Computer software. *Logos Bible Study Atlas* (Bellingham: Faithlife, LLC), June 7, 2025. Some geographical points added by author.

<sup>10</sup> Polhill, *Acts*, NAC, 314n64: “Lycaonian was an isolated hill-country dialect, and there are few literary remains of it. Centuries of Hellenistic influence in their area would have given them knowledge of Greek, and they would have had no difficulty in understanding Paul’s koine. As residents of a Roman colony, they may have had some familiarity with Latin as well.”

<sup>11</sup> Bock, *Acts*, BECNT, 470: “That opposing Jews would seek Gentile support shows how seriously they took the threat of the preaching of the gospel.”

<sup>12</sup> Schnabel, *Acts*, ZECNT, 603: “The ‘brothers’ (οἱ ἀδελφοί) are either Paul and Barnabas, or, more likely, the new believers in the emerging congregation, which would have included men and women.”

<sup>13</sup> CHRYSOSTOM: “Why didn’t the apostles go forth from there? Because they were not driven away, only attacked.” Quoted in Martin and Smith, eds., *Acts*, ACCS, 173.

<sup>14</sup> Polhill, *Acts*, NAC, 311: “Verse 4 would seem to follow more naturally on v. 2 with its note of the city being divided against the apostles, and some scholars have concluded that v. 3 is a later scribal addition and not part of the original text of Acts. It is not necessary to do so. Verse 3 is in deliberate tension with the preceding and emphasizes the power of the Christian witness and the divine enabling behind it. Even though there was strong resistance to the Christians (v. 2), still they were able to maintain their witness.”

[and the Lord] bore witness to the word of his grace, granting signs<sup>16</sup> and wonders to be done by their hands.

**Here's the first point from our message today. What's the key word for our message today? Endurance!**

1) Endurance means persevering through **opposition** (14:1–7)

Faithful followers of Christ cannot allow themselves to be intimidated by people who don't like their message. They've got to endure opposition. Paul was bold.<sup>17</sup> He was resolved. He was unafraid. He didn't get testy. He didn't get violent. But he didn't acquiesce to the pressures of the world. He didn't back down when opposition cranked up. Endurance... in the Christian life... Endurance ... in the preaching of the gospel means pressing on through resistance.

Now I don't know how long Paul and Barnabas stayed in Iconium, but **verse 3** says it was “a long time.” Everyone see that in **verse 3**? Probably they stayed six months or a year. Maybe two years. But I know that they stayed long enough to plant a church. In a few verses, we'll read about how they come back to Iconium sometime later and strengthen the church and appoint elders. So they stayed long enough to start a church. They stayed as long as they possibly could enduring opposition and making disciples. But eventually it became impossible for them to stay.

Because look at **verse 4**.

<sup>4</sup> But the people of the city were divided;<sup>18</sup> some sided with the Jews and some with the apostles.<sup>19</sup>

Remember what I said last week—*truth polarizes*. **You've got to dispense with the notion that there's some way that you can frame the gospel so that it won't offend people. Dismiss with the fiction that you can somehow soften its edges or make the gospel so palatable for an audience that they won't reject it. That's not how this works.** Truth polarizes. There's something liberating about knowing that. **“O people don't like what I have to say. That shouldn't surprise me.”** Some people didn't like what Paul had to say either. Some people didn't like what Jesus had to say.

Look at **verse 5**.

<sup>5</sup> When an attempt was made by both Gentiles and Jews, with their rulers, to mistreat them and to stone<sup>20</sup> them, <sup>6</sup> they learned of it<sup>21</sup> and fled<sup>22</sup> to Lystra<sup>23</sup> and Derbe, cities of Lycaonia,<sup>24</sup> and to the surrounding country,<sup>25</sup>

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<sup>15</sup> MacArthur, *Acts*, vol 2, MNTC, 46: “The mounting opposition did not intimidate Paul and Barnabas but energized them to speak out boldly. Nor did it deter them from spending a long time ministering at Iconium... Boldness is that essential quality without which nothing significant can be accomplished for the gospel. Boldness is what enables believers to persist in the face of opposition.”

<sup>16</sup> Mohler, *Acts 13–28 for You*, 21: “The signs God did through Paul and Barnabas served as authenticating marks that demonstrated God's favor upon their message.”

<sup>17</sup> Hughes, *Acts: The Church Afire*, Kindle Edition, chapter 22: “Such pluck and spunk has always been true of God's warriors. John Wesley once encountered a village bully when their carriages met upon a narrow road. The bully knew Wesley and disliked him and would not give him any leeway, staying in the middle of the road. John Wesley cheerfully gave the man the entire road, even though he had to turn into the ditch. As they passed, the bully said, ‘I never turn out for fools,’ and Wesley — all five foot two of him — retorted, ‘I always do.’”

<sup>18</sup> Bock, *Acts*, BECNT, 470: “This incident is described in Acts of Paul 2.3 with additional detail that includes a famous traditional description of Paul: “And he saw Paul coming, a man small in size, bald-headed, bandy-legged, well-built, with eyebrows meeting, rather long-nosed, full of grace. For sometimes he seemed like a man, and sometimes he had the countenance of an angel.” We do not know if this description is accurate, but the citation is often noted.”

<sup>19</sup> Polhill, *Acts*, NAC, 311: “It is noteworthy that Luke used the term ‘apostle’ here to refer to Paul and Barnabas. Here and 14:14 are the only places where he applied the term to anyone other than the Twelve disciples. The word means literally *one who is sent* and is used of official delegates or emissaries. Paul used the term regularly to refer to his own commission as an emissary of Christ. He applied the term to others as well: James, the Lord's brother (Gal 1:19; 1 Cor 15:7), Andronicus and Junias (Rom 16:7), and an unnamed group whom he distinguished from the Twelve (1 Cor 15:7; cf. 15:5). In Acts, Luke used the term in a restricted sense, which denotes only the Twelve who were eyewitnesses to Jesus' entire ministry. Acts 14:4, 14 are the exceptions to the rule. Perhaps Luke indicated here that Paul and Barnabas were delegates of the Antioch church, commissioned by them for their mission. Perhaps it indicates Luke's awareness of the wider application of the word and that he here slipped into the more customary and less specialized usage.”

<sup>20</sup> Schnabel, *Acts*, ZECNT, 605: “In a Jewish context, stoning (to death) was done to false teachers for teaching blasphemy. Since officials of the city are involved, it seems obvious that Luke does not refer to a synagogue punishment—the death penalty cases had to be tried by the governors of Roman provinces. It appears that some Jewish, Greek, and Roman citizens of Iconium wanted to harass the missionaries and pelted them with stones as a deterrent to further activities, probably accepting the possibility that they would be seriously injured or even killed.”



Lystra is about twenty miles south of Iconium.<sup>26</sup> Derbe is about fifty miles east of Lystra. And as they travel this route they would have encountered even more danger. More mountains, more robbers, more hostility. **This missionary journey is like Frodo and Samwise Gamgee travelling to Mordor. People are opposing them at every turn.**

But notice this. **Verse 7.**

<sup>7</sup> and there they continued to preach the gospel.<sup>27</sup>

They never stop preaching the gospel. It's all gas and no brake for the Apostle Paul until he gets done with this first missionary journey.

By the way, these cities: Iconium, Lystra, and Derbe are all in the region of Galatia. Luke uses the older term Lycaonia in **verse 5**. But when Paul writes to the churches that he planted in this region later, he uses the newer term Galatia. And that letter that he writes to those churches is one of our books of the Bible, the book of **Galatians**. That's the letter that Paul writes to the churches he started in Iconium, Lystra, and Derbe.

And it's interesting because Paul usually writes his letters to "a church," like the church in Ephesus or the church in Philippi or the church in Thessalonica. Or he writes to "a person," Timothy or Titus or Philemon.

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<sup>21</sup> JOHN CALVIN: "Note how long the holy champions of Christ held out. They are not put to flight by the mere opposition of enemies, but when the sedition comes to boiling point and the danger of being stoned is threatening, although many favor their teaching they do not persist any further... although they do flee so as not to plunge rashly into death, still their constancy in preaching the gospel makes it clear that they had no fear of danger... That is the proper kind of fear when the servants of Christ do not run willingly into the hands of their enemies to be cut down by them and yet do not desist from their duty. Nor does fear prevent them from obeying God when he calls, and so if the need arises they will even go through death itself in the fulfilment of their ministry." Quoted in Chung-Kim et al., eds., *Acts*, RCS, 192.

<sup>22</sup> MacArthur, *Acts*, vol 2, MNTC, 47: "Paul and Barnabas were bold, but not foolish. When they became aware of what was happening, in sensible self-preservation they fled to the cities of Lycaonia, Lystra and Derbe, and the surrounding region. Their flight was an act of prudence, not cowardice (cf. Matt. 10:23). There was obviously nothing more they could accomplish by remaining at Iconium, so it was time to move on to new territory where the gospel was needed. As it had done earlier in (Acts 8:1–4), persecution merely pushed the good news of forgiveness and salvation into new regions."

<sup>23</sup> Polhill, *Acts*, NAC, 312–3: "The site of Lystra was identified only in 1885, lying near the modern village of Khatyn Serai. Located in the hill country and surrounded by mountains, it was a small country town in Paul's day. Its main significance was as a Roman military post, and for that reason it had been given the status of a colony in 6 B.C. A Roman military road connected it with the other colony city in the region, Pisidian Antioch, 100 miles or so to the northwest. A statue has been found at Antioch which Lystra presented to that city in the second or third century and commemorating a concordat between the two cities. Perhaps this interaction between the two towns explains why Jews would have come so far in pursuit of Paul (v. 19)."

<sup>24</sup> Bock, *Acts*, BECNT, 471: "This area had a reputation for being somewhat 'rustic,' where the people were not very learned (Béchar 2001). These people were regarded as militant, intractable, and 'non-Roman' in their lifestyle (Strabo, *Geogr.* 12.6.2–5 [described as having little regard for civil law, being full of robbers, a source of much trouble to the Romans, and living among the mountain caves that protected them]; 14.5.24 [living on food unmixed with salt and were either Greek or barbarians]). Hemer (1989: 110) calls it a 'less developed part of Anatolia.' If so, the two scenes appearing early in Acts 14 and involving exclusively Gentile audiences cover both the most civilized (Iconium) and the more rustic (Lystra, Derbe) parts of Gentile culture, a type of geographical *inclusio* that shows the gospel's universality."

<sup>25</sup> Polhill, *Acts*, NAC, 312: "There were no other significant towns in the region, but the reference to the 'surrounding country' in v. 6 might indicate that they evangelized the smaller towns and countryside of Lycaonia as well."

<sup>26</sup> Polhill, *Acts*, NAC, 312–3: "The site of Lystra was identified only in 1885, lying near the modern village of Khatyn Serai. Located in the hill country and surrounded by mountains, it was a small country town in Paul's day. Its main significance was as a Roman military post, and for that reason it had been given the status of a colony in 6 B.C. A Roman military road connected it with the other colony city in the region, Pisidian Antioch, 100 miles or so to the northwest. A statue has been found at Antioch which Lystra presented to that city in the second or third century and commemorating a concordat between the two cities. Perhaps this interaction between the two towns explains why Jews would have come so far in pursuit of Paul (v. 19)."

<sup>27</sup> Schnabel, *Acts*, ZECNT, 605: "Luke concludes the Iconium episode by noting in summary fashion that Paul and Barnabas continue to proclaim the gospel (εὐαγγελιζόμενοι, present participle; see on 5:42) in Lycaonia (v. 7a), the region to which both Iconium, Lystra, and Derbe belonged. Since the conjunction translated as 'where' (κακεῖ) comes after the phrase that refers to the territories controlled by Lystra and Derbe, it is possible that Luke implies missionary activity in other Lycaonian towns besides these two cities. Traveling from Lystra to Derbe on the Via Sebaste, Paul and Barnabas would have passed through Dalisandos, Kodylessos, Posala, Ilistra, and Laranda."

Galatians is the only one of Paul's letters that he writes to a plural group of churches. Not "to the church of Galatia." But "to the churches of Galatia" (**Gal 1:2**).<sup>28</sup>

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Now watch what happens when Paul and Barnabas come to Lystra. Here's where things go off the rails for them. **Verse 8.**

<sup>8</sup> Now at Lystra<sup>29</sup> there was a man sitting who could not use his feet. He was crippled from birth and had never walked.

**Not "he tore his ACL playing basketball with his friends." Not "he fell off a horse and sprained his ankle." This guy was** "crippled from birth and had never walked." Why is this guy being mentioned in the Bible? You get the sense here that something amazing is about to happen, right? Paul's an apostle, and sometimes apostles are empowered to do amazing miracles!

<sup>9</sup> He listened to Paul speaking. And Paul [**I don't know, sensing that God wanted to do something amazing**], looking intently at him

Remember that's what he did with Elymas Bar-Jesus just before he supernaturally blinded him. and seeing that he had faith<sup>30</sup> to be made well,<sup>31</sup> <sup>10</sup> said in a loud voice, "Stand upright on your feet." And [**watch what happens here**] he sprang up and began walking.

Now this is nothing less than a supernatural miracle. This was "Holy-Spirit power" being put on display in front of these Lystrans. This was an awesome display of power!

It wasn't like Paul said, "**You're healed, now go jump on the bike for six months of rehab.**" Paul healed him instantaneously and completely. Consider the fact that this guy had never used his legs before! He probably didn't even have the muscle mass to begin walking, even if his legs did work properly. Nevertheless God healed him so remarkably and so completely that his first step wasn't a step. It was a leap!

he sprang up and began walking.

And I'm guessing that after he was healed his first words weren't, "**Gee, thanks.**" This guy had been listening to Paul preach the gospel of Jesus Christ. And this guy had faith to be healed. And so he probably leaped to his feet shouting, "**Hallelujah! Jesus is awesome! Hallelujah! Jesus heals!**" This was a life-changing, God-glorifying, awesome miracle of the Holy Spirit!

And now we're thinking, "**Well, these Lystrans in Lycaonia are all going to get saved, right? Surely this is the start of a revival in this town.**" Remember when Peter healed the crippled man at the temple in **Acts 3**? He went walking and leaping and praising God. That was a lot like this.<sup>32</sup> And people got saved afterwards.

And remember when Peter raised Tabitha from the dead in **Acts 9**? People got saved then too. Remember when Paul blinded Elymas Bar-Jesus in **Acts 13**? Sergius Paulus, the most powerful person on the island of Cyprus, got saved. Typically when there's a miracle like this, people respond with faith in Christ. And so you would think, after this great miracle in Lystra, these guys are going to get saved. The people of this city are going to turn to the Lord *en masse*.

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<sup>28</sup> For more on that, see the verse by verse series through Galatians entitled "AWOL from Grace": [www.messiahbible.org/galatians-awol-from-grace](http://www.messiahbible.org/galatians-awol-from-grace)

<sup>29</sup> Schnabel, *Acts*, ZECNT, 605: "Luke provides few details concerning the missionary activity of Paul and Barnabas in Lystra; instead, he concentrates entirely on the healing of a lame man and on the nearly fatal consequences for the missionaries."

<sup>30</sup> Polhill, *Acts*, NAC, 313n63: "Faith is often connected to healings in the miracles of Jesus, usually noted by Jesus after the healing with the words 'your faith has made you whole' (cf. Luke 7:50; 8:48; 17:19; 18:42). With the lame man at the temple gate, there is no mention of faith in the healing story, but Peter did seem to refer to it in his subsequent sermon (Acts 3:16)."

<sup>31</sup> Schnabel, *Acts*, ZECNT, 606: "The man's hope to be 'saved' (σωθῆναι; see on 4:9) should be understood in terms of an expectation to be cured. Since Luke's readers know that Paul's message connects faith with Jesus the Savior, with forgiveness of sins, and with eternal life (13:12, 39, 48), the faith of the lame man probably includes all of these. The expectation that the power of the God of the Jews whom Paul proclaimed, a power that brought Jesus back from the dead, would bring him onto his feet and heal him from his birth defect and also grant him forgiveness of sins and eternal life."

<sup>32</sup> Polhill, *Acts*, NAC, 313n62: "The Acts narratives contain a remarkable number of parallels between Peter and Paul. It may well be that Luke selected these particular incidents from the traditions available to him in order to highlight how God worked in the same manner through the apostle to the Gentiles as he had the apostle to the Jews."

But instead of that, look, something terrible happens. What happens here in Lystra is one of the saddest things that happens in the whole book of Acts.<sup>33</sup> Look at verse 11.

<sup>11</sup> And when the crowds saw what Paul had done, they lifted up their voices, saying in Lycaonian, “The gods have come down to us in the likeness of men!”

What? What in the world are they talking about? Where did that come from?

“The gods have come down to us in the likeness of men!”<sup>34</sup>

What is that? Paul didn’t preach that to them. That’s not the gospel. That’s a weird, superstitious, variant of the gospel.<sup>35</sup>

And it gets worse. Look at verse 12.

<sup>12</sup> Barnabas they called Zeus, and Paul, Hermes,<sup>36</sup> because he was the chief speaker.

So instead of giving glory to God and receiving the truth of the gospel, they deify Paul and Barnabas. They totally misunderstand what Paul and Barnabas are there to do. It’s almost comical what happens here. It’d be funny, if it wasn’t so sad. Their ignorance and their superstition gets the best of them.

Zeus and Hermes were two of the gods of the Greek pantheon.<sup>37</sup> And by the way they weren’t particularly honorable gods. According to Greek myths, these gods were powerful. But they were also sinful.<sup>38</sup> They were capricious. They were petty at times. They were completely ungodly.

Here’s the thing, Paul and Barnabas weren’t in the Jewish synagogue anymore.<sup>39</sup> **I guess I buried that lead.** They aren’t dealing with Jews and Gentile God-fearers. They are in the Roman hinterland. They are in the pagan backwaters.<sup>40</sup> And these Lycaonian Gentiles react to Paul’s miracle by resorting to their own

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<sup>33</sup> Hughes, *Acts: The Church Afire*, Kindle Edition, chapter 22: “This was terrible! The apostles had been locked out of Pisidian Antioch and Iconium as heretics, and now they were being deified in Lystra! It is difficult to say which was worse — having stones thrown at them or this blasphemous attempt to worship them as gods.”

<sup>34</sup> BEDE: “This was a stupid error on the part of Gentiles, who thought that everything which they saw above themselves was a god.” Quoted in Martin and Smith, eds., *Acts*, ACCS, 176.

<sup>35</sup> Mohler, *Acts 13–28 for You*, 23: “When the crowds confuse the message with the messenger, they distort the entire gospel... This scene bears a significant application for the modern church. While few congregations may attempt to crown their preacher as Zeus and offer a sacrifice to their ministers as gods, we can easily erect personality cults which place the preacher upon a pinnacle of perceived authority and infallibility. Christians can and must give respect and honor to their spiritual leaders. That respect, however, slips into hero worship when it overlooks moral failure or lowers standards of godliness. Those who preach and teach the word must realize that they live as mere men like anyone else.”

<sup>36</sup> Fruchtenbaum, *The Book of Acts*, 306: “Jupiter and Mercury are Latin names. The Greek text gives the names Zeus and Hermes. The Greeks considered Zeus to be the chief of the Olympian gods and the ruler of the world. In many statues, he is pictured as a tall, bearded man, which indicates that Barnabas may have had a beard and may have been taller than Paul. The reason the people wrongly concluded that Paul was Hermes or Mercury was because he was the chief speaker. In Greek mythology, Hermes was known as the herald of the gods and the spokesman of his father Zeus.”

<sup>37</sup> Schnabel, *Acts*, ZECNT, 608: “Inscriptions and reliefs found in Lystra attest to the local connection between Zeus and Hermes. This background may explain why Paul and Barnabas were identified with visiting gods rather than as extraordinary human miracle workers.”

<sup>38</sup> Schnabel, *Acts*, ZECNT, 608: “Zeus is the Sky Father, the highest god, the Gatherer of Clouds who sends rain and thunder and lightning, the strongest of the gods (and thus connected with bull sacrifice), the god who gives victory, the father of men and gods whose domain is the agora where he presides over the dealings of the community, the Savior, the ruler of all rulers, the god of the universe (and thus worshiped in large temples)... Hermes is described as ‘the god who governs speech.’ ... Hermes appears in the Greek epics as son of Zeus, as the swift messenger sent by Zeus, as the emissary (with staff in hand) who crosses the boundary between the living and the dead, and thus as the god of transition and mediator between god and humans, as Mystagogos who assists in rites of initiation, as the Archegetes who reveals secret documents, as Tetragonos who surveys the four cardinal points of the terrestrial world, as the founder of civilization, tasked by Zeus to preside over trade, the market, merchandise, and sales; often represented as Kriophoros who is the ‘ram-bearer’ or ‘good shepherd,’ but also as the ‘prince of thieves’; as the god of gymnastics and of athletic and musical contests (associated with the lyre and music), as the deity most friendly to mortals.”

<sup>39</sup> Polhill, *Acts*, NAC, 313: “There was evidently no Jewish synagogue in Lystra. There was at least one family of Jewish extraction there, since Lystra was the home of Timothy and his Jewish mother (16:1).”

<sup>40</sup> Schnabel, *Acts*, ZECNT, 606 disagrees with this popular interpretation: “To view the citizens of Lystra as ‘rustics’ because they lived in Lystra and spoke Lycaonian is misguided. The population would have been bilingual, speaking Greek as well, with some of the descendants of the veterans speaking also Latin. Recent research has shown that Lystra was a prosperous city that was not as insignificant as earlier scholars assumed.”

superstitious paganism. They identify Paul and Barnabas with their stupid Greco-Roman religion. And instead of having a great breakthrough with these pagan people in Lystra, this missionary venture turns into a nightmare.

It gets worse; look at **verse 13**.

<sup>13</sup> And the priest of Zeus,<sup>41</sup> whose temple was at the entrance to the city, brought oxen and garlands to the gates and wanted to offer sacrifice with the crowds.

This is getting out of control. They're going to have a worship service right here. They are going to worship the messengers, Paul and Barnabas, instead of receiving the message about Jesus.

Now, Paul and Barnabas are caught in this ridiculous scenario. And they're trying to stop it.

<sup>14</sup> But when the apostles Barnabas and Paul heard of it, they tore<sup>42</sup> their garments<sup>43</sup> and rushed out into the crowd, crying out,<sup>15</sup> "Men, why are you doing these things? We also are men,<sup>44</sup> of like nature<sup>45</sup> with you, and we bring you good news,<sup>46</sup> that you should turn from these vain things<sup>47</sup> to a living God, who made the heaven and the earth and the sea and all that is in them. <sup>16</sup> In past generations he allowed all the nations to walk in their own ways.<sup>48</sup> <sup>17</sup> Yet he did not leave himself without witness, for he did good by giving you rains from heaven and fruitful seasons,<sup>49</sup> satisfying your hearts<sup>50</sup> with food and gladness."<sup>51</sup>

Let me just point out a few things here. First of all, the Lystrans were speaking in Lycaonian. Everyone see that in **verse 11**? Part of the confusion involves Paul and Barnabas not understanding what they are saying and what was going on. Most people in the Roman Empire spoke at least two languages. So Paul and Barnabas

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<sup>41</sup> Schnabel, *Acts*, ZECNT, 608: "The priest (ιερέυς) would have been a member of the local elite who occupied this honorary position for a certain period of time. 'Bulls' (ταῦροι), the most noble sacrificial animal, were often sacrificed to Zeus, the strongest of the gods. Garlands (στέμματα) woven from twigs were worn on the head by people participating in the procession from the city to the temple, which, often in Greek cities, was located outside the city walls, as was the case in Lystra. The garlands were brought into the city for Paul and Barnabas to wear as participants in the procession from the city to the altar of Zeus situated in front of the temple where the bulls (adorned in the procession with ribbons and gilded horns) would have been sacrificed. Other participants in the procession would have carried a basket with the knife for the sacrifice, a vessel containing water, and an incense burner; musicians played the flute. The ritualized slaughter of the bull would have been followed by a meat meal. The garlands that had been worn were often deposited in the shrine."

<sup>42</sup> Polhill, *Acts*, NAC, 315: "The tearing of one's clothes is a gesture found elsewhere in the Bible. It could dramatize a state of mourning (cf. Gen 37:29, 34), express extreme distress (Josh 7:6), or protest a perceived blasphemy (Mark 14:63). Here the gesture expressed ardent protest and was designed to put a stop to the intended sacrifice."

<sup>43</sup> Polhill, *Acts*, NAC, 315: "Ministers should follow the example of the apostles and take warning from Herod."

<sup>44</sup> Bock, *Acts*, BECNT, 478n9: "That the early church worshiped Jesus in light of such feelings about the worship of humans is significant, for it shows that Jesus clearly was seen as more than a mere mortal."

<sup>45</sup> Bock, *Acts*, BECNT, 477: "Paul and Barnabas are mere mortals (ὁμοιοπαθεῖς, *homoiopatheis*, literally, of like passions; James 5:17; similarly, Acts 10:26)."

<sup>46</sup> Fruchtenbaum, *The Book of Acts*, 307–8: "Their message was literally, 'We are gospelizing you.' We are simply evangelists, not gods!"

<sup>47</sup> Bock, *Acts*, BECNT, 477: "To this audience, Paul's message is that they are to change orientation (ἐπιστρέφειν, *epistrephein*, turn) from vain and dead idols to the God who lives and is the creator of heaven and earth and everything in them (Luke 1:16–17; Acts 3:19; 17:25–26)."

<sup>48</sup> Polhill, *Acts*, NAC, 316: "It has often been argued that Paul drew opposite conclusions from the argument from natural providence in the Lystran sermon as compared to Rom 1:18–25. That is true, but it is equally true that the two are in no way contradictory. The basic premise is identical in both: God has revealed himself in his works, in creation. The contexts and hence the application of the premise are radically different in the two instances. In the speech at Lystra as well as the speech on the Areopagus (cf. 17:24–28), Paul used the argument from creation to build bridges, to establish a point of identification with his pagan hearers. While they may never have heard of his God before, they had *seen* him—in his providential works of nature. In Rom 1:18–25 Paul was seeking to establish humanity's responsibility before a just God. The Gentiles could not claim that they had no responsibility before God on the grounds that they had received no revelation. They had received revelation in God's providential works of creation and had perverted that revelation by worshiping nature itself, exchanging the Creator for the creation. The Gentiles were thus without excuse (Rom 1:20)."

<sup>49</sup> Mohler, *Acts 13–28 for You*, 25: "The pagan worldview sought to offer sacrifices in order to appease the gods, and thereby hoped for good harvest seasons. Paul says the true God has already graciously provided those for them, in spite of their idolatrous sacrifices. Moreover, Paul calls them not to offer a sacrifice for a good harvest but to come and know this God personally—to forsake vanity and revel in the resplendent riches of God and his glory."

<sup>50</sup> Bock, *Acts*, BECNT, 477: "This is classic prophetic Jewish natural theology like that seen in Isa. 40–41."

<sup>51</sup> Polhill, *Acts*, NAC, 317: "Evidently Paul and Barnabas were cut short in their witness. It is anything but a complete exposition of the gospel. Paul never got beyond the basic monotheistic message of one God. There is no reference to Christ at all. Luke was well aware of its incompleteness. Verse 18 indicates that the sermon was cut off."



were preaching in Greek, but the Lystrans responded by calling them gods in Lycaonian.<sup>52</sup> This must have caused massive confusion. And you get the sense here that Paul and Barnabas weren't completely sure at first what's happening. But when they finally figure out what these Lystrans are doing, they tear their clothes and beg them to stop.<sup>53</sup> There's nothing more terrifying for a messenger of God than to be mistaken for a god. That's a nightmare. That's the exact opposite of what they hoped to accomplish.

Secondly just a bit of background here.<sup>54</sup> There's a famous legend that circulated in this area, in first century Galatia, that Zeus and Hermes had visited homes while disguising themselves as men. And since they weren't received hospitably, they punished the people. This was a myth that circulated in this area. And in this myth, there was one couple who did receive the gods hospitably, and they were rewarded greatly. Probably this was in the back of the minds of these Lystrans and they figured, **"The gods have returned. Zeus and Hermes are back! This time we're going to honor them not just with hospitality but with worship!"**

Thirdly notice how Paul preaches to them. He appeals to them not with OT Scripture references like he's done in the past. But he appeals to them with general revelation.<sup>55</sup> He says, **"we are men like you. And there is one living God who created the universe. He gives you rain. He grows your crops. Every good thing in this world is from him. You've got to turn away from these foolish superstitions."**

He doesn't quote **Isaiah 53**.<sup>56</sup> He doesn't quote **Psalm 2** or **Psalm 16** like he did in the synagogues.<sup>57</sup> These guys don't know those Scriptures. Instead he goes back to the very beginning and alludes to **Genesis 1**.<sup>58</sup> He says, **"There's only one God who created the Universe! And it's not Zeus and Hermes! And it's not me and Barnabas!"** And he's also saying, **"You've got to give this stuff up! You've got to embrace the one true God, the Living God."**

Yet despite these petitions, look at **verse 18**.

<sup>18</sup> Even with these words<sup>59</sup> they scarcely restrained the people from offering sacrifice to them.<sup>60</sup>

**Here's a second point from our message today. Write this down. Endurance! That's our key word. Endurance means persevering through opposition. But also....**

2) Endurance means confronting and defying **superstition** (14:8–20)

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<sup>52</sup> Schnabel, *Acts*, ZECNT, 607: "While Greek had become the main language of Asia Minor since the conquest of Alexander in 334/333 BC, remaining the *lingua franca* until the eleventh century, the indigenous languages had not vanished. The fact that few inscriptions written in other languages (apart from Greek, Latin, and Hebrew) survive in Asia Minor is probably due to the fact that the old languages were used in oral communication while Greek was used for written texts."

<sup>53</sup> Hughes, *Acts: The Church Afire*, Kindle Edition, chapter 22: "It is to their eternal credit that they did not receive worship by men for even a split second. But now they were in definite trouble! Hell hath no rage like a worshiper scorned! If the people could not fit Paul and Barnabas into their neat little idolatrous preconceptions, they would do away with them."

<sup>54</sup> Hughes, *Acts: The Church Afire*, Kindle Edition, chapter 22: "There was just one complication: these half-wild Lycaonians had an ancient legend that Zeus and Hermes had once come to the hill country disguised as mortals seeking lodging. Though they asked a thousand homes, no one would take them in. Finally, at a humble cottage of straw and reeds, a poor elderly couple, Philemon and Baucis, freely welcomed them and feasted them with what meager means they had. In appreciation, the gods transformed the cottage into a temple, making the couple priest and priestess. And when they died, they were immortalized as a great oak and a great linden tree. The inhospitable homes, however, were destroyed. These poor Lycaonians were determined not to make the same mistake again."

<sup>55</sup> Mohler, *Acts 13–28 for You*, 24: "Time and time again in the Old and New Testaments, human ingenuity, human theological 'creativity,' human superstition, and human philosophy all succumb to an indictment of vanity. Some believe that intellectual sophistication will lead them to knowledge of the truth. They search in vain because what they seek is vain. Truth, and the glories therein, only comes through divine revelation."

<sup>56</sup> CHRYSOSTOM: "Notice how they do not mention the prophets at all.... This is because they had learned that one should strive not so much to say something worthy concerning God as something that is of use to one's listeners." Quoted in Martin and Smith, eds., *Acts*, ACCS, 176.

<sup>57</sup> Polhill, *Acts*, NAC, 315 does suggest though that, "Paul was perhaps quoting from Ps 146:6."

<sup>58</sup> MacArthur, *Acts*, vol 2, MNTC, 51: "Paul later evangelized the pagans on Mars Hill in Athens from the same starting point—the need to explain the ultimate cause for the world and everything in it."

<sup>59</sup> Polhill, *Acts*, NAC, 313: "There is no mention of the name of Jesus or the power of God, but the reader of Acts has had sufficient examples by now to know that it is indeed through the divine power that the miracle was worked (cf. 3:16; 4:30; 9:34)."

<sup>60</sup> Polhill, *Acts*, NAC, 317: "One would have thought that Lystra would be particularly receptive, given its mainly Gentile population and the fact that they had even taken the apostles for gods. But crowds are fickle, especially when their expectations are not fulfilled."

You might say, “O those silly, superstitious pagans in Lystra. I’m so glad we don’t have anything like that in America, Pastor Tony.” You sure about that?<sup>61</sup>

Have you ever heard stuff like this before? (1) “You know, I’m basically a good person. God will allow me to go to heaven after I die.” Have you ever heard that before? You know what that is? It’s silly, presumptuous superstition.<sup>62</sup>

How about this one: (2) “As long as my good deeds outweigh my bad deeds, I’ll go to heaven.” 3) How about this one: “God’s a loving God, he would never send anybody to hell.”

How about this one: 4) “All roads lead to heaven, and all religions lead to God.” How about this one: 5) “All religions are basically true. It’s not a matter of truth; it’s a matter of sincerity. As long as you are sincere, God will accept you.” Heard those before?

Look, not all superstition is rabbit’s feet and seven years of bad luck for breaking mirrors. Even though we’ve got a fair amount of that kind of stuff in our country too.

Here’s Merriam Webster’s definition of superstition, “a belief or practice resulting from ignorance, fear of the unknown, trust in magic or chance, or a false conception of causation.”<sup>63</sup> What’s an accurate conception of causation, you might ask? Here it is. You ready? God causes. God is sovereign. And God has chosen to save us through his Son, Jesus Christ. And if you’re going to testify to this truth, you need to be ready to press through some of these common objections, which are really nothing more than modern-day superstitions.

Here are some superstitions that I think a lot of Christians have to battle through as well: (1) “God wants you to be healthy, wealthy, and comfortable.” I’m not so sure about that. (2) “If you read your Bible and pray every day, then nothing bad will ever happen to you.” Is that true? “God will just make everything hunky-dory. And your life will rock.”

Now I do believe God will bless. And some of those blessings include peace and joy and contentment. But that’s not contentment without a storm. Sometimes that means contentment in the midst of a storm. Everybody understand the difference? (3) Here’s another common superstition among Christians. “If you faithfully witness for the Lord, people will love you, and no one will ever oppose your message. And if people do oppose you, you’ve done something wrong. You haven’t been winsome enough!” Is that what the Bible teaches? We know better, don’t we, after studying Acts.

Now watch what happens to Paul. These missionaries can scarcely restrain these Lystrans from worshipping them. They plead with them to turn away from their pagan superstitions and embrace the Living God. And then this happens.

Look at verse 19.

<sup>19</sup> But Jews came from Antioch and Iconium,

These are the two places that Paul and Barnabas have been chased out of. And these people hate the gospel so much... they hate Paul’s message so much... that they travel several miles over several days to another city to continue persecuting Paul. Antioch is almost a hundred miles away!

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<sup>61</sup> KONRAD PELLIKAN: “Even far more foolishly and with greater impiety have we remained fixated on the saints, and because of the miracles that they performed while still living here on earth some continue to invoke the saints, to devote themselves to the saints and to trust in the saints as saviors. And it has been very widespread among the masses to venerate the saints in this manner and to erect altars, to fashion statues, to offer sacrifices, to adore and worship, to fear their judgments, to go to them as intercessors, as if we are convinced they are more compassionate than our God. Instead, saints have been offered to us by God not so that we might worship them and invoke them but so that we might imitate their examples of piety, whereby we might come to know the good will of God toward us and that we are summoned to follow the calling of God.... Therefore, those who esteem the saints in such a way that in them they recognize the mercy and clemency of God and imitate them in piety, these manifest a kind of adoration that is most pleasing to God as well as to the saints.” Quoted in Chung-Kim et al., eds., *Acts*, RCS, 194.

<sup>62</sup> Mohler, *Acts 13–28 for You*, 23–4: “While we may laugh at the stupidity that would lead someone to worship a tree, make no mistake: the desire for vanity resides deep within our affections. Will money save you? Will a large bank account stop you from falling into the arms of death? Will a successful career provide you with peace, security, and comfort?”

<sup>63</sup> Inc Merriam-Webster, *Merriam-Webster’s Collegiate Dictionary* (Springfield, MA: Merriam-Webster, 1996).

and having persuaded the crowds [these are the same crowds that were just previously worshipping Paul and Barnabas],<sup>64</sup> they stoned Paul and dragged him out of the city, supposing that he was dead.<sup>65</sup>

**“Hey, hey, I got him. I cracked his skull with my rock. He’s dead for sure.”**

**“Alright, well get him out of here. Drag his lousy body out of the city. We don’t want his corpse rotting and stinking things up around here.”**

And that’s what they do. They take Paul. They drag him out of the city. I can only imagine how much blood he was covered in. And this guy who they wanted to worship as a god, now they stone him and leave him for dead. I guess he wasn’t a god after all. He tried to tell them.<sup>66</sup>

You know what I wonder about when I read this account of Paul’s stoning? I don’t know why Barnabas wasn’t attacked with him. It seems as if the Jewish antagonizers had it out for Paul. So he’s the one that takes the punishment here. But I wonder if Paul thought of Stephen as the rocks were flying at his face. I wonder if Paul remembered the part he played in persecuting and torturing Christians as these Lycaonians were torturing him. I wonder if while the people were dragging him out of the city, supposing that he was dead, and he was half-conscious... I wonder if he remembered how he used to drag Christians out of their houses and away from their families and put them into prison!

Remember Acts 8:3, “But Saul was ravaging the church, and entering house after house, he *dragged* off men and women and committed them to prison.” By the way that word “dragged” in Acts 8:3 is the same Greek word (σὺρῶ [*syrō*]), that’s used in Acts 14:19, “they stoned Paul and *dragged* him out of the city, supposing that he was dead.” I wonder if Luke used that same word consciously to describe both “draggings.”

And I wonder too, if Paul, lying outside of Lystra, humiliated, rejected, his body broken, bruised, bloodied, scarred, his ego wounded, his confidence shot... I wonder if he thought of his Savior in that moment. I wonder if he thought of the wounds that Christ endured in order that he (a murderer, a persecutor of Christ’s bride, the church) might be saved.

And I wonder if he thought in that moment. **“My time on earth is up. I’ve finished the race. I’m going to die early, just like Stephen. I’m heading home to see my Savior.”**

But God had different plans for Paul.

<sup>20</sup> But when the disciples<sup>67</sup> gathered about him, he rose up<sup>68</sup>

**“Live to die another day, Paul!”**

he rose up

I wonder if this is where Paul first crafted those famous words, “For to me to live is Christ, and to die is gain. If I am to live in the flesh, that means fruitful labor for me. ... My desire is to depart and be with Christ, for that is far better. But to remain in the flesh is more necessary on your account” (Phil 1:21–24).

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<sup>64</sup> Bock, *Acts*, BECNT, 479: “These Jews who are pursuing Paul ironically parallel the actions of Saul going to Damascus to take Christians into custody (9:1–2).”

<sup>65</sup> Polhill, *Acts*, NAC, 318: “Paul mentioned in 2 Cor 11:25 the one time when he had been stoned, probably referring to this incident at Lystra (cf. 2 Tim 3:11).”

<sup>66</sup> Sometimes God protects his messenger, as we see in the following anecdote. But he doesn’t always do that. Hughes, *Acts: The Church Afire*, Kindle Edition, chapter 22: “Dave Howard, in his book *The Power of the Holy Spirit*, tells about a fearless pastor he ministered with in Colombia named Lupercio Taba. One Sunday Taba was preaching from his pulpit when a man appeared at a side window of the church, aimed a pistol at him, and ordered him to stop preaching. The congregation, seeing the danger, dove to the floor and hid under the pews. Taba, however, went right on preaching the gospel. The man then fired four shots at him. Two shots went past the preacher’s head, one on one side, one on the other, and lodged in the wall behind him. Two shots went past his body, one under one arm, one under the other, and also lodged in the wall. The would-be assassin then dropped his gun and fled. Taba, still unmoved, continued his sermon.”

<sup>67</sup> MacArthur, *Acts*, vol 2, MNTC, 54: “Possibly among them were Timothy, a native of Lystra (Acts 16:1), his mother, Eunice, and grandmother, Lois (cf. 2 Tim. 1:5). To the believers’ joy and amazement, Paul regained consciousness, arose and courageously entered the city.”

<sup>68</sup> HEINRICH BULLINGER: “It is abundantly clear from this passage that, by the power of God, Paul was raised up as if from the dead; he was not cured by the remedies of the brothers. For who has ever heard of someone who was stoned walking the next day? Especially someone whom they assumed to be dead! Someone whom they stoned with hatred seething through themselves! Certainly they would not have stopped throwing stones, if they had believed any living breath remained in him.” Quoted in Chung-Kim et al., eds., *Acts*, RCS, 197–8.

<sup>20</sup> But when the disciples<sup>69</sup> gathered about him, he rose up and entered the city,

Wait, what? He went back into the city? The city of people that just tried to kill him? **“Hey Paul, take the day off, buddy! Go back to Antioch for some R&R.”** Maybe his body’s too broken to travel just yet. I don’t know. But for whatever reason, with absolute defiance towards those who would oppose him and try to kill him, he goes right back into the city.

**This is like a scene right out of Rambo.** Paul, probably had some broken limbs. He was probably bleeding profusely from different places on his body. He’s probably limping as he returns to the city.<sup>70</sup> And instead of ducking for cover or waiting for reinforcements, he just goes right back into the city.

and on the next day he went on with Barnabas to Derbe.

**If I was a painter... which I’m not... If I was an artist, I would take canvas and some paint brushes and try to recreate this scene. Paul, bloodied and broken, limping back into the city that just stoned him. And I would paint this look of humble and self-effacing determination on Paul. I don’t know how I’d capture that. But I’d try.**

**And I would paint this group of people, Barnabas and these new believers, which the Bible calls “disciples” in verse 20... did you catch that?... I would paint them closely following after Paul with this look of bewilderment on their faces. “Is he really going back into that city?”**

**And I would hang that picture on my wall. And every time I was having a bad day, every time I preached a sermon that I thought didn’t connect with the audience, every time I shared the gospel and got rejected by someone, I’d look at that painting. And I’d say to myself, “could be worse!” “If Paul could press on in the midst of adversity, I can too!”**

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Now watch what happens as they come to Derbe.<sup>71</sup>

and on the next day he went on with Barnabas to Derbe. <sup>21</sup> When they had preached the gospel to that city and had made many disciples,<sup>72</sup>

What? No sorcerers? No stonings? No verbal and physical attacks? It’s like God gives them a little reprieve after all the drama in Lystra. People get saved, and they make disciples, and that’s it.<sup>73</sup>

<sup>21</sup> When they had preached the gospel to that city and had made many disciples, they returned to Lystra and to Iconium and to Antioch, <sup>22</sup> 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.

Let me show you something quickly here.<sup>74</sup> Check this out. Look at the map again.

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<sup>69</sup> Mohler, *Acts 13–28 for You*, 25: “Luke compresses the history in order to keep the narrative moving. He leaves out certain details that he, and ultimately the Holy Spirit, have deemed unimportant. Luke indicates that there is a group of disciples with Paul—no doubt new believers who have come to Christ through Paul’s ministry—and that Paul survives the stoning and re-enters the city.”

<sup>70</sup> CHRYSOSTOM: “‘He entered the city.’ Do you see his zeal? Do you see how fervent he is, how set on fire?” Quoted in Martin and Smith, eds., *Acts*, ACCS, 178.

<sup>71</sup> Polhill, *Acts*, NAC, 318: “Since Derbe was some sixty miles southeast of Lystra, the journey would have taken several days on foot.”

<sup>72</sup> Bock, *Acts*, BECNT, 482: “Instead they are engaged in the task of ‘making disciples’ (μαθητεύσαντες, *mathēteusantes*), an example of an intransitive verb having causative force even as a participle.”

<sup>73</sup> JOHANN SPANGENBERG: “In Christianity with the gospel it is like a storm in the air. Now it rains, soon the sun shines, before we look around a storm gale and downpour comes, again the sun peeks out and it is nice and bright and clear. This is how it is in Christianity, too. Today there is good peace, tomorrow persecution comes, before we look around the persecution is halted, the tyrants are dead and immediately the gospel shines out brightly. Those from Lystra want to heave Paul and Barnabas into heaven and place them on God’s throne, but now the Jews from Iconium and Antioch come and stone Paul, dragging him out of the city like a corpse. Here we see how the common rabble think, how erratic, how unthankful. The good Paul comes and preaches God’s Word to them, would gladly like to help them into heaven and eternal life, but they reward him wickedly, wanting to hurl stones at him until he is dead, so that surely he can say, “Through many tribulations we must enter the kingdom of God.” Quoted in Chung-Kim et al., eds., *Acts*, RCS, 199.

<sup>74</sup> Schnabel, *Acts*, ZECNT, 619: “When Paul and Barnabas had completed their mission in Derbe, they could have reached Tarsus traveling farther east for only about 140 miles (220 km.) and then reaching Antioch in Syria after a further 140 miles (210 km.). Instead, they backtracked their earlier route through the cities in which they had encountered severe opposition that put their lives in dangers, walking 195 miles (330 km.) back in a westerly direction. This demonstrates the importance that Paul and Barnabas accorded the nurture of the new churches.”





Iconium, Lystra, and Derbe and Tarsus<sup>75</sup>

Here's all the places where they've traveled, going as far as Derbe, which is in Lycaonia. Paul and Barnabas are in Derbe. And Antioch (Syrian Antioch), where they started, is just a couple hundred miles east of Derbe.<sup>76</sup> And after they leave Derbe, they make their way back home to that Antioch. We'll read about that in a moment.

But they could have easily traveled east from Derbe and returned home. That's a much quicker route than going back through Lystra and Derbe and all these other places they've visited. Look at the map, they even could have stopped over in Tarsus which is Paul's hometown. Surely they could have stayed with someone there.

But instead of doing that, instead of going the quickest way back home to Antioch, they decide instead to backtrack. They go west through Lystra (where Paul got stoned and left for dead by the people) and Iconium (where they almost got stoned by the people) and Pisidian Antioch (where they got driven out of the city). Are these guys nuts? Do they have a death-wish or something?

Are these guys just gluttons for punishment? No. Here's the thing. They know that these new, young converts to Christianity are vulnerable. And their missionary journey wasn't just about evangelism. It wasn't just about making converts. It was about making disciples. And it was about planting churches.

So they go back through these cities where they had made converts and they do three things. Look at **verse 22**. They (1) "strengthen the souls of the disciples." **"God is good. He loves you. Read his word. Believe his promises. Keep gathering as a church. Serve Christ until you die."** Probably something like that to strengthen the souls of the disciples. (2) "They encourage them to continue in the faith." **"Don't give up. Don't give in. Don't go back to your superstitious paganism. Don't indulge your flesh. Grow as a disciple. Grow as a follower of God. Pray. Read Scripture. Gather for Worship. Encourage one another."** They encouraged them to continue in the faith. **These are the same things I'm doing with you right now.**

And one more thing. What's the third thing that they do? (3) They encouraged them to endure by telling them "through many tribulations we must enter the kingdom of God." They encouraged them to persevere in the faith. And they encouraged them to endure through tribulation because, "through many tribulations we must enter the kingdom of God."<sup>77</sup>

<sup>75</sup> Atlas taken from Logos Bible Study, Computer software. *Logos Bible Study Atlas* (Bellingham: Faithlife, LLC), June 7, 2025. Some geographical points added by author.

<sup>76</sup> Polhill, *Acts*, NAC, 318: "Had the two chosen to do so, they could have continued southeast from Derbe on through the Cilician gates the 150 miles or so to Paul's hometown of Tarsus and from there back to Syrian Antioch. It would have been the easiest route home by far. They chose, however, to retrace their footsteps and revisit all the congregations that had been established in the course of the mission. In so doing they gave an important lesson on the necessity of follow-up and nurture for any evangelistic effort. Paul would again visit these same congregations on his next mission (16:1–6)."

<sup>77</sup> Fernando, *Acts*, NIVAC,: "If Paul had not preached when it was dangerous to do so, he would have avoided suffering. But he followed a Master who asked his followers to love their neighbors as themselves. Thus, he had to go out with the gospel, which met their deepest need. Similarly, if we remain quiet about Christ in our workplaces, we may avoid suffering. We can avoid fatigue if we refuse to assist our aging neighbor who is sick and in need of help. We can avoid inconvenience and pain if we refuse to care for the member of our small group who has had a nervous breakdown."

**Let me ask you a question, church. When was the last time you encouraged someone by telling them “through many tribulations we must enter the kingdom of God”?<sup>78</sup>**

**Write this down #3**

3) Endurance means carrying on through **tribulation** (14:21–28)

Endurance, right? Endurance! Perseverance! Finishing! Finishing! Not just starting. Not just beginning. Life’s not a sprint; it’s a marathon. And faithful followers of Christ finish.<sup>79</sup> They endure through tribulation and they finish.<sup>80</sup>

*through many tribulations we must enter the kingdom of God.*

Paul’s already encouraging this group of believers to finish well, and they’ve only been Christians for like ten minutes!<sup>81</sup>

Can I just read you something really quickly? This is an excerpt from a commentary on **Acts** written by Ajith Fernando. Fernando is a longtime missionary in South Asia. And he has served Christ faithfully in a hostile location. I found this statement incredibly convicting. Listen to this.

**“A common reaction of Christians when they see a fellow Christian suffer is to look for something wrong that the sufferer has done. They seem to think that these persons are suffering because they have done something that is not in keeping with God’s will. They may advise the sufferers or even rebuke them. If a person is tired because he has done God’s work along with his job and family responsibilities, he is rebuked for working too hard. When a person is unpopular in the workplace for taking a stand for Christ, she is rebuked for being unwise. When someone gets assaulted and ends up in the hospital for trying to make peace in a conflict, he is criticized for trying to act like a messiah, not minding his own business. Those who should be encouraging sufferers end up discouraging them and adding to their pain.”<sup>82</sup>**

Can you imagine telling Paul, **“Paul you need to tone it down a bit. That’s your problem! If you would just dial down the boldness a little bit, you wouldn’t be in this mess.” Yet, we do that kind of stuff with each other all the time, and the stakes aren’t even as high here as they were for Paul two-thousand years ago.**

**Listen, we’ve got to get to a place as Christians where instead of avoiding tribulation or trying to theologize our way out of it, we embrace it and encourage one another through it. Otherwise we can start to believe something about life and trials and struggle and opposition that is not biblical.<sup>83</sup>**

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<sup>78</sup> Fernando, *Acts*, NIVAC, 404–5: “The gospel does sometimes divide communities. Well do I remember being at a Buddhist temple facing the wrath of the monks and their lay supporters in an area where we had started an evangelistic work. Our accusers said to us that they had lived in peace for so many centuries and that now we had come and ruined the peace of the community. And we knew that this was partly true. It was a hard accusation to take, for Christians seek to follow Paul’s advice: ‘If it is possible, as far as it depends on you, live at peace with everyone’ (Rom. 12:18). We who aim to be instruments of peace had become agents of disharmony.”

<sup>79</sup> “A.W. Tozer writes Christ calls men to carry a cross; we call them to have fun in his name. He calls them to forsake the world; we assure them that if they but accept Jesus the world is their oyster. He calls them to suffer; we call them to enjoy all the bourgeois comforts modern civilization affords. He calls them to self-abnegation and death; we call them to spread themselves like green bay trees or perchance even to become stars in a pitiful fifth-rate zodiac. He calls them to holiness; we call them to a cheap and tawdry happiness that would have been rejected with scorn by the least of the Stoic philosophers.” Quoted in Fernando, *Acts*, NIVAC, 409.

<sup>80</sup> Mohler, *Acts 13–28 for You*, 26: “In 2 Corinthians 4, Paul encourages the church by saying that this light, momentary affliction is preparing for us an eternal weight of glory beyond all comparison. Suffering will come. We must endure; for on the other side of tribulation is the sweet embrace of our Savior.”

<sup>81</sup> Polhill, *Acts*, NAC, 319: “The theme is one Paul often sounded in his epistles—we must be willing to suffer with Christ if we expect to share in his glory (Rom 8:17; cf. 2 Thess 1:4; 2 Tim 2:12); the path to resurrection is by way of the cross.”

<sup>82</sup> Fernando, *Acts*, NIVAC, 408.

<sup>83</sup> Fernando, *Acts*, NIVAC, 409–10: “Some years ago I was involved in a group that edited, for an international audience, a follow-through guide for young new believers produced by Singapore Youth for Christ. The third of the eight studies in this guide is called ‘Strength in Difficulties.’ A chapter like this should be included in all basic follow-through guides.”

Jesus said, “in this world you will have trouble” (John 16:33). Paul said, “through many tribulations we must enter the kingdom of God” (Acts 14:22). The Greek word used in both of those verses is the word *θλίψις* (*thlipsis*) meaning “tribulation.” **You will experience this!**<sup>84</sup> And Paul said at the end of his life in 2 Timothy, “Indeed, all who desire to live a godly life in Christ Jesus will be persecuted” (3:12). **We need to come to grips with this as Christians.**

And look what else they do in verse 23. This is strategic.

<sup>23</sup> And when they had appointed elders<sup>85</sup> for them in every church,<sup>86</sup> with prayer and fasting they committed them to the Lord in whom they had believed. <sup>24</sup> Then they passed through Pisidia and came to Pamphylia. <sup>25</sup> And when they had spoken the word in Perga, they went down to Attalia, <sup>26</sup> and from there they sailed to Antioch, where they had been commended to the grace of God<sup>87</sup> for the work that they had fulfilled. <sup>27</sup> 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<sup>88</sup> to the Gentiles.<sup>89</sup>

Can you imagine what that conversation was like in Antioch? **“We battled a sorcerer and struck him blind. We travelled for miles and miles throughout the empire preaching the gospel. We got kicked out of some of those cities. The Jews opposed us. The Gentiles opposed us. Paul got stoned and left for dead in Lystra. And then he went right back into the city.”**

**“Say what? Seriously?”**

**“And we just kept on preaching.” “And we endured.” “We endured, and we didn’t quit.”**<sup>90</sup>

<sup>28</sup> And they remained no little time<sup>91</sup> with the disciples.

... back in their home church... in Antioch.

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**I’ll close with this. Endurance. Endurance. Endurance. God give us endurance. God give us long obedience in the same direction. Augustine of Hippo wrote once that, “The Church through the lowliness**

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<sup>84</sup> Fernando, *Acts*, NIVAC, 405: “Some Christians are not enthusiastic about evangelism. They feel conversion is desirable, but if it is going to cause so much disruption to families and societies, they ought to downplay its importance. For example, some evangelists in Sri Lanka went to an area and won many Buddhists to Christ, provoking opposition to Christianity. Then other Christians, who were doing joint social projects with the Buddhist temple nearby, tried to discourage the evangelism because it was disrupting their program.”

<sup>85</sup> JOHN CALVIN: “It is apparent from this that it is not enough for people once to have been instructed correctly in godly doctrine and to hold the substance of the faith, if they do not make continual progress. That is why Christ not only sent apostles to spread the gospel but also commanded pastors to be appointed, so that the proclamation of the gospel might be perpetual and in daily practice. Paul and Barnabas observe this order laid down by Christ when they assign pastors to individual churches, so that after their departure teaching may not cease and fall silent.” Quoted in Chung-Kim et al., eds., *Acts*, RCS, 200.

<sup>86</sup> Fernando, *Acts*, NIVAC, 403–4: “As the word ‘elder’ was already in use in the Old Testament and in Israel in the first century, ‘the office of the elder in the New Testament cannot be fully understood without the background of the Old Testament local elder, an office still functioning in New Testament Judaism.’ The Old Testament elders had the ‘twofold task of judging and discipline generally, and of ruling and guiding the people in an orderly way.’ In the New Testament the same people who are called elders are also called bishops (*episkopos*). The two names are used interchangeably in Acts 20:17, 28 and Titus 1:5, 7. While the name elder points to the seniority of the person, bishop (meaning overseer) points to the role. We will discuss this role in greater detail in our study of Acts 20:1–38... The plural is always used in connection with the appointment of leaders. While it is true that one person must emerge as the key leader in a group, biblical leadership operates in the context of a team. Paul uses the word used for the Jewish council of elders, *presbyterion* (Luke 22:66; Acts 22:5), for the gathering of the elders (1 Tim. 4:14). It is from this word that the ecclesiastical term *presbytery* comes.”

<sup>87</sup> Bock, *Acts*, BECNT, 483–4: “The reference to the grace of God (τῇ χάριτι τοῦ θεοῦ, *tē chariti tou theou*) is yet another way to speak of God’s care in their safe return within the mission (15:40). The expression serves as a reminder that God’s grace has directed them and cared for them in their travels, even in the face of persecution.”

<sup>88</sup> Fruchtenbaum, *The Book of Acts*, 313: “The Gentiles could and did enter the church through the *door of faith*. They did not enter by morals nor by circumcision nor by Greek philosophy nor by pagan mythology, but by grace through faith.”

<sup>89</sup> RUDOLF GWALTHER: “Moreover, the example of the apostle teaches us what we should do after we have done our duty. Let us commit all the success of it to God, by whose providence we know all things are governed.” Quoted in Chung-Kim et al., eds., *Acts*, RCS, 201.

<sup>90</sup> Mohler, *Acts 13–28 for You*, 27: “When you endure suffering and tribulation, you have no idea how God will use your story to encourage others. The testimony of God’s suffering saints nourishes the faith of all God’s people.”

<sup>91</sup> Bock, *Acts*, BECNT, 484: “‘No little time’ is Lukan litotes (other examples: 12:18; 15:2; 17:4, 12; 19:23–24; 27:20).”

she now *endures* is winning the sublime station she is to have in heaven.”<sup>92</sup> Martyn Lloyd-Jones wrote once, “There is nothing which so certifies the genuineness of a man’s faith... as his patient *endurance*, his keeping on steadily in spite of everything.”<sup>93</sup> Dietrich Boenhoeffer said once, “Just as Christ maintained his communion with the Father by his *endurance*, so his followers are to maintain their communion with Christ by their *endurance*.”<sup>94</sup> Charles Spurgeon said once, “By perseverance [even] the snail [eventually] reached the ark.”<sup>95</sup> May God give us endurance in the Christian life. Amen? God help us with that. Let’s pray to that end right now.

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<sup>92</sup> Augustine of Hippo, *The City of God, Books XVII–XXII*, ed. Hermigild Dressler, trans. Gerald G. Walsh and Daniel J. Honan, vol. 24, *The Fathers of the Church* (Washington, DC: The Catholic University of America Press, 1954), 169.

<sup>93</sup> Martyn Lloyd-Jones, *Spiritual Depression: Its Causes and Cures* (Eerdmans, 1965), 229.

<sup>94</sup> Dietrich Boenhoeffer, *The Cost of Discipleship*, Revised and unabridged edition, Translated by R. H. Fuller (Macmillan, 1979), 103.

<sup>95</sup> C. H. Spurgeon, *The Salt Cellars: Being a Collection of Proverbs, Together with Homily Notes Thereon*, vol. 1 (Bellingham, WA: Logos Bible Software, 2009), 89.