

## Building Up The Church Acts 14: 21-23

We saw last week the stoning of Paul, the leaving him for dead by the hostile crowds, the followers of Christ gather around him, Paul getting up and going back into that very city. But realizing the danger and the volatility, and even the danger he might cause to other believers it was now time to leave. It was now time to depart, but it certainly was not time to give up the task of making and maturing disciples for the glory of Christ. So look at verse 21, **“When they had preached the gospel to that city and had made many disciples, they returned to Lystra and to Iconium and to Antioch.”** Incredible verse isn't it? Here we see the missionaries preach in Derbe. And we read verses like this and they take in so much geography and time, that often we miss it. Derbe was not just next door but about 90 miles away. That is not a short distance. But when they are there preach, and the gospel penetrates the heart of many in that city.

We are not told how long they were in that city, but there seems to be a vibrant church that has been established. In chapter 20 when Paul takes up a collection for the church of Jerusalem, this church participated and even sent a representative. And we can go through great seasons of opposition, but in the midst of opposition there are seasons of great blessing where we see the Lord open the hearts of individuals and they come to Christ. Notice also what they are called — **“many disciples.”** They are not just individuals who made a profession, but disciples — followers of Jesus Christ. Their lives had changed, and that is true and authentic Christianity. Once you truly meet Christ, you cannot remain the same. Your whole life can be summarized by this one word — disciple. We are studying the Word and seeking to implement Jesus and his teachings in our lives. Why? We are disciples.

And then they start making their return to Antioch to end their first missionary journey, and report back to the church at Antioch. Again, we are not familiar with ancient and eastern geography but that last phrase in verse 21, **“they returned to Lystra and Iconium and to Antioch”** covers about two hundred miles all done by foot. It is an incredible journey. And Paul and Barnabas enter into these cities as we will see to strengthen and encourage the believers in these cities. And think of it, because these are the very cities that had drove the missionaries out. They wanted to stone them in Iconium, and they succeeded in stoning Paul in Lystra. And there is a great principle here about the church. And that is the needs of our fellow believers are so much more important than our own comforts and needs. We realize that when we are Christ-centred, then we are other centred. We really care about our brothers and sisters in Jesus Christ. And you see that in Paul and Barnabas how much they must have cared and loved the individuals in these churches to actually travel back through these cities even though the same animosity toward Christ existed.

And much of the work we see happening in the Book of Acts, happens to be the preaching of Christ and the making of disciples. But we realize the other half of that equation is how do you mature those disciples so that the witness of Christ remains in those places, and there is a strong and lasting testimony to Christ? And we see the whole goal is not just to see people make a profession of faith but to establish

churches — to establish these organized and solid churches that would continue to be a beacon of light in their communities. And for that to take place there has to be a love and care for the ones whom Christ has called to his saving grace. There has to be a maturing of the people of God for the glory of Jesus Christ.

And so here are these young churches, with young and infant believers who need care. And we often wonder what we should be doing, or how we should care for those who are in the church of Jesus Christ? In fact, there is a renewed interest to refashion or redo the church of Christ. But right here we see proper care for building up of the church of Jesus Christ. So as the apostles revisited these churches, what did they do that was so necessary? And that is what I want to begin to look at this morning. I want us to see the necessity of ministry in the local church for the upbuilding of the people of God.

1. We see need to encourage believers to remain faithful. V.22.

It is amazing when you think of how to encourage individuals in the grind of life, how do you do it? We might point out that they can do it, they have the strength to overcome any obstacles in their lives. But what Paul does is point them back to the Lord, to Jesus Christ. He keeps the gospel of the Lord Jesus Christ before their hearts and lives. And all of the Christian life, no matter what situation we find ourselves in, what trial and obstacle is before us is about faithfulness to our Lord. This is so different when we look at the modern day call in the church of Jesus Christ today. We are somebody. We are special and the Lord cannot help but love you. It is all about self. But Christianity is not about you or me, but about Another. It is about living, trusting him, and seeking to make much of him in every moment and every circumstance of your life. And as we look at the call to be faithful, how are we doing? Are we progressing to know Christ and follow him? Are we growing in our faith and trust in Christ? And does our lives have a positive — encouraging effect on others?

Because look at what Paul and Barnabas are doing, “**strengthening the souls of the disciples.**” Now think about it. “Strengthening” is not a hard word to define. It means making something or someone stronger. Someone might have a very physically demanding job that requires a lot of lifting. When they first start their muscles are fatigued when they get home, and they are physically exhausted. But the more they carry out that task their physical life changes. Muscles are built, and the job actually becomes easier. It is still work and toil, but what has changed? They are strengthened. But this strengthening ministry of Paul and Barnabas is not physical but “the souls of the disciples.” It is internal. Their ministry here is to strengthen the soul.

But how do they carry that out? How do we strengthen the souls of our brothers and sisters in Jesus Christ? Listen to Ephesians 4:11-13, “**And he gave the apostles, the prophets, the evangelists, the shepherds and teachers, to equip the saints for the work of ministry, for building up the body of Christ, until we all attain to the unity of the faith and of the knowledge of the Son of God, to mature manhood, to the measure of the stature of the fullness of Christ.**” Notice that he gave apostles and prophets, and shepherds and teachers. In fact we will see that they will establish shepherds and teachers in each of these locations. But these are all verbal gifts given to the church, for the purpose of equipping the saints for the work of the ministry — so

that the body of Christ, in other words, the church might be built up — another way of saying that it might be strengthened. Well, how is that accomplished? It is through the knowledge of the Son of God. It is through this knowledge of God; this knowledge of Jesus and all that he is for us. When he speaks of mature manhood and the full stature of Jesus Christ — this all comes through the teaching of these blessed truths.

And we see something of the enormity of that strengthening ministry in 2 Corinthians 4:16, **“So we do not lose heart. Though our outer self is wasting away, our inner self is being renewed day by day.”** We do not lose heart even though life can be so tough and exhausting. We feel so often weighed down and perplexed about the trials and difficulties of life, but we do not lose heart. It is not because of the outer self, but because of the inner self is actually growing stronger the further we continue in these truths and know these truths and learn these truth and apply these truths in our lives. The truths of the gospel and our relationship to our God are given to change us — to strengthen our confidence in this great Christ.

And look at the main emphasis of this strengthening ministry to these young believers, **“encouraging them to continue in the faith.”** Encouraging has the meaning of something positive. We know what it is like to have our hearts encouraged. We feel stronger in our reliance on Christ, hopeful in the task at hand. And I think this is something, because these are all young believers. None of them have been saved for years or decades, but they are all young. And young believes many times have such an enthusiasm to follow Christ that so often we want to catch that. But with those highs come the lows, and there are wild swings in new believers. There are great spiritual highs and lows — times where the world and the flesh and the devil can't seem to touch them, then the next moment wondering if they are truly in the faith.

Now so often when we see those wild shifts we want to talk about eternal security. We want to talk about no one can snatch you out of the Saviour's hand, nothing can separate you from the love of God in Christ Jesus. Once you are in you are forever in. But it is the corollary truth that Paul emphasized here. They were to continue in the faith. They have started and they are following Christ, but they are to continue. And continue speaks of effort on our part. I don't feel like coming out to church, or I feel depressed and want to isolate, or I don't feel like reading the Scriptures or praying or fellowshiping with God's people — continue in the faith!

And why is this so necessary? Because one of the greatest evidences of our faith and salvation is perseverance, endurance, we keep going and following Christ. In fact, if we turn away then we have never truly been born from about and we have nothing but the wrath of God that awaits us. Paul loved these individuals in theses churches and didn't sugarcoat the truth of what would take place if they departed. Listen to this sobering passage in Hebrews 3:12-14, **“Take care, brothers, lest there be in any of you an evil, unbelieving heart, leading you to fall away from the living God. But exhort one another every day, as long as it is called ‘today,’ that none of you may be hardened by the deceitfulness of sin. For we have come to share in Christ, if indeed we hold our original confidence firm to the end.”** The call here is to exhort one another to keep enduring and not fall away with an unbelieving heart. And then he indicates how we can know if we truly have a share in Christ — “if we indeed we hold our confidence firm to the end.” Once saved always saved? And the answer is

a resounding yes. Jesus will not lose any of those who have been given by the Father, and the clearest evidence is all who are truly his will have ups and downs but they will continue to persevere. They will hold their confidence firm to the end. And one of the means that God uses to help God's true people to hold their confidence is in this passage in Hebrews by exhorting and encouraging one another, and in this ministry of Paul — continue in the faith. We come to recognize and celebrate all that Jesus is and has accomplished in our lives. Preach the gospel to yourself and to one another. Come out with your brothers and sisters in Christ. Don't forsake the assembling of God's people. That is the first step toward apostasy which is usually a slow and steady regression away from Christ. It should startle us to see the sin in us and how easily it is to depart from Christ. It should send shock waves to the deepest recesses of our souls to think we could be without the hope of Christ. Those who are true believers hear the warning and they cleave to the means that God has given them to persevere and continue in the faith of Christ.

Now there are a couple of challenges. One is are you continuing? Or are you drifting? If you keep drifting than know there is no hope once you depart from Christ. Encourage your heart through these truths of Christ. Let others minister these breathtaking truths to you. The other thing is we should all be involved in this ministry. The church is a care centre for the souls of the people of God. And it is a ministry he has given to each one of us to care for one another, encourage one another, exhort one another to continue on in trusting Christ. And we need this ministry, not just from our pastors but through one another. Are you active in the building up of one another for maturing of your fellow brothers and sisters in Christ? God is so good in giving us fellow believers who care about us, but we also need to be those individuals who care and love those in our household of faith.

2. We need to encourage believers in the midst of the troubles of life. V. 22.

I really do not know where the theology came from that Jesus was going to take all our struggles, problems and difficulties away. We realize the health, wealth, and prosperity gospel is alive and well today. And we might condemn it, but how often are we frustrated by trials and suffering? How often do we complain as if there is some mistake in God's plan? God is either not loving or faithful. It has become fashionable today to believe that if you are a faithful follower of Christ then God will do his part and remove all your difficulties and trials. He owes us. But God doesn't owe but knows what is best in our lives, and also tells us what we can expect. Listen to Matthew 16:24, **"Then Jesus told his disciples, 'If anyone would come after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross and follow me.'**" The cross was a means of death and painful death. Jesus calls believers to walk the same path as him. 2 Timothy 3:12, **"Indeed, all who desire to live a godly life in Christ Jesus will be persecuted."**

Think of what the writer of Hebrews says in Hebrews 12:5-6, **"And have you forgotten the exhortation that addresses you as sons? 'My son, do not regard lightly the discipline of the Lord, nor be weary when reproved by him. For the Lord disciplines the one he loves, and chastises every son whom he receives.'**" The writer of Hebrews says that trials are not a sign that God has forgotten us or he is angry at us, but a sign that he loves us and actually has the highest intentions for us,

and that is to mold us, change us into the blessed likeness of Jesus Christ — to produce holiness in us, and that holiness is produced more often than not through the painful process of trials and tribulations. God will send us through things we would never choose to go through in our lives, to bring change that would never come unless we went through those trials. The trials in our marriages, family, work, health, and even in the church are indications that we are loved by God. And if you followed Jesus for any length of time, your life is a living testimony to what I have just said. Our problem is we want happiness as we define happiness rather than holiness. And there is a joy in holiness knowing Jesus is mine, and this is my God. It does not mean we have all the answers but that is where trust comes in when we are in the midst of our tribulations.

So look at what Paul says here, **“and saying that through many tribulations we must enter the kingdom of God.”** Amazing isn't it? Maybe this should be one of those signs we have in our homes to remind us of where we are living, and God's plan for each of our lives. And look at the word “through.” It speaks of not only encountering tribulations but going through them. In other words, as you go through one there are others that await you. There is not just a series of troubles we go through and then they come to an end. No, through “many.” The word speak of a multitude, whether we are young or old or whatever. Many means many. The “we” also indicates that it is just not Paul and other missionaries but this is the lot of all believers and what they can expect. And tribulations is a general word for your trials and difficulties in this world. It is a word that speaks of the trials we encountered because we are believers in Christ, and others hate the gospel of grace and stand opposed to the truths of Christ. And also the trials of living in this fallen world — tribulations at work or home or health related. They are so variegated and multifaceted. And they are there by the direct hand of God.

And this is where we need to the eyes of faith through his Word to really see what God is doing, that he is in control, and he is all wise and all good. Because there are times if we just looked at our trials on a human level it would look like just chaos, that there is no purpose or reason, that many of the trials are just random, or that God is just absent. But think of what God is doing in the midst of our trials. Listen to James 1:2-4, **“Count it all joy, my brothers, when you meet trials of various kinds, for you know that the testing of your faith produces steadfastness. And let steadfastness have its full effect, that you may be perfect and complete, lacking in nothing.”** Now how many of us really count it all joy when we go through trials and tribulations? Oh good, here comes more rejection! Fantastic, another marital tiff that we have to work through! Wow, great stuff, I broke my toe and it's altered my whole week! Really? Is that what James means? And the answer is absolutely not! But he says, **“Count it all joy, my brothers, when you meet trials of various kinds, for,”** and that “for” is the key word. It is indicating why we rejoice -the reason or purpose, and the reason why we rejoice is because of the knowledge of what God is doing in our trials. Tested faith produces steadfastness. What is steadfastness — steadfastness is simply continuing in the faith — continuing to follow Jesus — the exact thing that Paul and Barnabas are calling on the church to continue in. And the whole goal is perfection. The whole goal is to mirror Christ internally and externally. That we would be the image bearers of an all holy, loving and glorious God above. Can you think of anything better?

And notice that these trials are not in anyway for us to earn salvation but they are a way that we come into the kingdom of God, and in the context right here he is not talking about God's general rule over everything, but talking about heaven where our Lord and Saviour is. In other words, the trials that God sends us through are preparing us for glory. We quoted this verse earlier but let me read it in its fuller context, 2 Corinthians 4:16-18 says, **“So we do not lose heart. Though our outer self is wasting away, our inner self is being renewed day by day. For this light momentary affliction is preparing for us an eternal weight of glory beyond all comparison, as we look not to the things that are seen but to the things that are unseen. For the things that are seen are transient, but the things that are unseen are eternal.”** What encouraging words! Our trials, no matter how severe are light and momentary compared to the eternal weight of glory which is beyond all comparing. But Paul says the trials and suffering of this life are preparing us for glory. Think of the goodness of God and rejoice in it: God will forfeit our present comfort in order to produce in us what needs to produce to cause our eternal joy in Christ to be full. What a great God.

And as Paul establishes these new believers in the faith, he establishes them in the theology of Christ that is so practical. It is seeing the necessity of continuing to follow Christ. God creates faith in us, but we do not sit back in passivity but we pursue Jesus. We continue in the faith, and seek to encourage other believers to continue. And living with our brothers and sisters really should encourage us and also give us a level of accountability to continue. Be active in the church, get to know others. It is one way we pursue Christ-likeness. And we all go through trials of various sorts. And the temptation is really for us to give our own interpretation. Don't trust in your own interpretation. Trials are in your life, even those caused by others are under the ordained rule of our Lord for his glory and our God. Walk by faith in his interpretation. Trust in what he says. Trials are not a mistake or deviation of the plan but they are the plan. **“Through many tribulations we must enter the kingdom of God.”**