

## The Grace of God in the Work of God Acts 14:24-28

There are certainly times in our lives where we need to rest and recharge our souls. And there are other times we need to work and labour, and seek to do it diligently for the Lord. And it seems so often we confuse the two, or overdo one of the two. Some are workaholics, always labouring and never taking time to rest. Whether it is secular work or full time ministry, there are many that simply end up burning out. Burning out is not trusting God. God has created us to work, but also created sabbaths and times of rest. We need to know our limitations and be able to rest. Others need a little more than a push, they are lethargic and look at the most blessed life as one just rest. They are known as lazy. They hate work of any kind whether work around the house, or at their place of employment or even in the church. They see it as a curse. They love to be served but not to serve, even though our Lord came to serve rather than be served. Part and parcel of the image of God in us is God is a working God. God is a God who accomplishes. And we are much more fulfilled when we labour and when we labour in all that we do for the glory of Christ.

And the reason why I say all of this is the missionaries are traveling home. Paul and Barnabas have probably been away anywhere from six months to a year. And you can imagine as we looked at the last two chapters how exhausting the work of the ministry can be. There is need a time to be refreshed and a time to be recharged before the next journey. I also find it amazing that they come back to the church that sent them out. These were not lone visionaries who went out on there own authority. They realize their connection to the wider body of Christ, and their accountability not only to God but the entity that he has built, and that is the church of Jesus Christ. We really are connect to Christ and to one another, and therefore accountable to one another.

As Paul and Barnabas return to Antioch there are so many things going on, and one of the greatest things that we can see is that the gospel work that God has called us to is work. It is labour. It is effort. God has not called us to passivity but to activity. The New Testament are full of commands given to believers and to churches in how we are to live and function, pray and learn of him, and how we are to be witnesses of Christ, it even instructs us how we are to suffer. It is all about Christ, and that takes work. But this work is always totally reliant on Christ. Our labours always realize the limitations of what we can accomplish. The results are always left in the Lord's hands. The amazing thing about these results is that God is always doing more than we can ever imagine through the efforts of his people.

Now as we hear of the missions activities as they visit our church, there will always be a couple of things that we should hear. One is we should hear about their efforts and their work. It does take effort in planning to preach, or in making contacts, or seeking to engage people with the gospel. There is actually much effort put in. But the other thing we will hear is what God has accomplished. It is his grace that effects change. All the glory goes to him. So in the end our thoughts are not primarily on the missionaries, or here on Paul and Barnabas, but look at what God has done. Look at what he can do through such weak and feeble instruments. Look how he can change hearts. God is always at the centre and he is always the hero of their stories. So the

conclusion that we can reach through all of this is that God can use our efforts. He can use us to minister the breathtaking truths of the gospel of Jesus Christ.

Some of you are really running well in making known Christ and serving him. Some of you need a little push to truly serve him and learn of him. And all of us need encouragement in following and making much of Christ. And this is what we see in this passage of Scripture. We see both of elements of work and God's stunning and amazing grace. And we should be so encouraged that God can and does use those who labour for him. I talk to so many who think their lives and labours are vain, useless, and no effect. God truly does use our lives more than we could ever imagine. Praise him for the goodness of his grace. I want to encourage those who are labouring this morning to continue on, and those who are sitting on the sidelines to enter in and see what God can do with such lives as yours and mine. So I want to see a couple things here this morning.

1. We need to see the gospel as work. Vv. 24-26

I think because we emphasize, and we should emphasize the work of God and the grace of God, that we can wrongly think that somehow the work of the Lord just happens in some mystical way. We might pray for our church, for the lost or whatever, and now we are going to sit passively by and see what God will do. It is what is behind such statements as "Let go and let God," or "I can't but he can." There is some truth in each statement, but the primary thrust is inactivity. In fact, it is a lack of trust to put effort into ministry or change in our lives or seeking to do the will of God. We make so many excuses for our lack of activity in making much of him. Paul after emphasizing the sovereignty of Jesus Christ earlier in Colossians 1 says in verses Colossians 1:28-29, "**Him we proclaim, warning everyone and teaching everyone with all wisdom, that we may present everyone mature in Christ. For this I toil, struggling with all his energy that he powerfully works within me.**" Proclaiming and warning and teaching all take effort and forethought and planning. They just don't happen. He says, that he toils and struggles with all that is in me. God has called us to work, and to work diligently. How are we doing in that? Is there any effort in making much of Christ and knowing him?

Look at verse 24-25 which begins the chronicle of the voyage home of Paul and Barnabas, at least their home church in Antioch, "**Then they passed through Pisidia and came to Pamphylia. And when they had spoken the word in Perga, they went down to Attalia.**" We see they went from Pisidia, and they would have no doubt stopped in Pisidian Antioch, where they had opposition earlier but many came to Christ, and then they travelled to Pamphylia, and the capital of Pamphylia is Perga. Here maybe while they waited for a ship to sail from Attalia to Antioch they preached in Perga, no doubt doing the customary thing of preaching in the synagogues and then reaching out to the Gentile community. And again, we have mentioned so often the way it is worded in the Book of Acts, but Luke records, "**they had spoken the word in Perga.**" There is the central thrust of ministry. It is preaching not "a" word but "the word." This is the specific gospel of Jesus Christ crucified and risen from the grave as the only hope for sinners. They are eager and willing to preach Christ in any situation that the Lord has given them.

Now look at verse 26, **“and from there they sailed to Antioch, where they had been commended to the grace of God for the work that they had fulfilled.”** Notice that they sailed to Antioch. And notice the connection they have with the church we saw this right at the beginning of chapter thirteen. It was in this church where they prayed and fasted for these men. It was at this church where the Holy Spirit confirmed to the congregation to send out Paul and Barnabas. It was to this church where they were accountable for their efforts and for their activities. They report back to them. And there are a couple of things we see in the text. One is they commend them to the grace of God. This is what the church did. They realized they could not go with them. But even better than any earthly person, the God of all grace would be with them. It would be his grace that would protect, sustain, ordain opportunities, and keep them going even in the face of great opposition. God used the prayers of his people to sustain and strengthen the missionaries in the midst of so much pressure, trials, and tribulations. And it is also a great lesson for us. Not only does God use our prayers, but our whole lives are a testament to the grace of our God. The only reason we are here this morning is his grace. He is what has caused us to persevere, and sustains us through all of the trials we have gone through. Are you ever amazed that you are still following Christ? It is a testament to his powerful grace.

The other thing we need to see here is that what they would report back about was work. There was effort put in. The proclamation took work. It took in traveling from place to place, sailing which was not easy from day to day, interacting both publicly and privately with both Jews and Gentiles, entering synagogues, explaining the Old Testament Scriptures to the Jews and how it pointed to Christ, seeking to show the One true God to the Gentiles which all of us are answerable to, recognizing and enduring the opposition and pressing on in making known Christ, teaching new believers, and suffering in a way that pointed to Christ. That is effort.

So when missionaries report from the field, they do talk about their activities, what they have been busying themselves doing, how they have sought to bring the gospel to light to bear in the places of their ministry. We also see that even in our own lives there is to be work and labour in making known and truly seeking to glory in Christ. Think of the work that God has called us to do, because there are some who never rest and need to rest, but most never truly get busy in the work God has called all of us into. There is a epidemic of laziness many times where we want to have instant spirituality, instant everything without truly putting in effort. Philippians 2:12-13, **“Therefore, my beloved, as you have always obeyed, so now, not only as in my presence but much more in my absence, work out your own salvation with fear and trembling, for it is God who works in you, both to will and to work for his good pleasure.”** What is the command here? Work out your salvation. What does that mean? It certainly does not mean earning salvation, that has been accomplished through Christ’s work. But working out is confirming our salvation and growing to know the Christ who purchased you. It is getting up in the morning, and reading scripture and praying, or finding another time during the day to know the Christ of my salvation. But that takes effort. That means I have to say no to other things such as extra sleep or maybe watching television, social media, YouTube or whatever. It takes effort. Work out your salvation. Are you working out your salvation?

And here is the thing, it will surprise you how God will use your life. Again, some of you are doing great at knowing and growing in him. You have a daily time with our God, you are faithful to church and times where you can hear the Word. And so many say they want to be used by God, but you cannot give away what you do not have. You cannot bluff your way in some way of having a vibrant and growing relationship with Christ when you don't. And again, we do need to rest and make time for rest, but that can be an excuse also. I am just so tired! And I get it, we do get tired. It is not that we have this urge all the time to spend so sweet time with the Lord. But if we are going to have that relationship with Christ, and have him use us in the lives of others then we are going to have to put some effort into it. There are some things we need to say no to in order to say yes to Christ. The Gospel work is work. God has called us to labour, but oh what bountiful fruit comes through the lives of those who labour for the glory of Christ. You can imagine the joy and excitement Paul and Barnabas had as they shared their missionary journey.

2. We need to see the gospel as God's work. Vv. 27-28.

We so often want to be the hero of our own stories. And there are some people that we look to as bigger than life. It might be a certain gospel singer or a preacher, and we hold them up on a pedestal. But we realize there is only room for one hero and one to be glorified. And that one is none other than our great Lord and Saviour. I can remember years ago reading the biography of the first Baptist missionary sent out from America, Adoniram Judson. This was back in the last 19th century. There was no mass communication, and Judson became a household name in the U.S., because his sister would publish her brother's letters that he sent to her from Burma. And his life was one of such danger and harrowing escapades. When he arrived in New England, churches filled to the rafters to hear all his escapades in the jungles. But what he would do is preach the gospel and point to Christ. And so many were so deeply disappointed. Judson knew that it was all about Christ. He knew although redeemed through the blood of Christ that he was an unworthy and worthless vessel. The glory of his life and ministry is that it was in the hands of another.

And look at verse 27, **“And when they arrived and gathered the church together, they declared all that God had done with them, and how he had opened a door of faith to the Gentiles.”** I wonder what that service was like. I wonder how long it was. I wonder how the church who knew these men sat absolutely amazed, because they report all that was done. How they had travelled through all of Cyprus with little or no fruit, and then they met a false prophet and magician, and how God had blinded him, and then the proconsul of that area actually came to Christ. If this official can come to Christ, certainly there is no stopping the gospel. How they were forced out of Iconium, and then went to Lystra, and how the people wanted to worship them as Greek gods, and how Paul was stoned, and he still had many of the scars on his body. But how through all of this, the word of God, the blessed message of Jesus Christ crucified had access into the hearts of so many individuals.

And noticed that they declared **“all that God had done with them.”** They were so careful to point away from themselves to the Author and Finisher of our faith. It is Christ who builds his church. This is what God has accomplished. No one can come to the Saviour unless the Lord draw him. Every person ever born is born dead in

trespasses and sins. They are dead toward God. They have no life before him and they have no desire for him. It is a spiritual and internal condition. They do not want to please him, nor can they please him. Dead is dead. There are not levels of death. We do not say that someone is almost dead, but they are either in the category of living or dead. And what can a dead person do physically? And the answer is nothing? What can a spiritually dead person do? And the answer is nothing.

But I love the way it is worded here, because there is no let go then and let God work. Don't get in the way by trying or working or putting in effort. They reported "**all that God had done through them.**" God has worked through the missionaries. The normal way that God calls sinners to salvation is through what is called the external call. That is where the gospel of Jesus is explained. that is what Paul and Barnabas did. We looked at a couple of sermons Paul preached. God has chosen to use that external call to give what is known as an internal call, which is an effectual call to salvation. All that the Lord calls externally are responsible to hear and respond. And sinners willfully turn from that call, reject, ignore and even despise that call. But all that the Spirit of God calls, God gives them the capacity to respond. He gives them life, and with that first breath of life they respond and believe and want to follow Christ. That is why the feet are beautiful of those who publish the glad tidings of the gospel.

And the one who not only used the message that was preached, but he also ordains the situations where that message is going to take effect is none other than God. Look at what they announce to the church along this line at the end of verse 27, "**and how he had opened a door of faith to the Gentiles.**" Look at what God had done. He had opened a door of faith to the Gentiles. They no doubt chronicled how they went to the Jews first, but that message was rejected, and the main thrust of salvation was through simple faith in Jesus by Gentiles or non-Jews. The one who opened that door and that access into the hearts and lives was none other than God. And there were names behind this report of individuals who were trusting Christ and new creatures in Christ. And we might think this is strange language because was not the door opened by Peter when he was before Cornelius and his household? Also many in Antioch were Gentile believers. And that is true, but through this first mission the door is wide open. The churches that have been establish are basically Gentile churches.

And it is amazing, and I will just mention this briefly, and we will look at it next time we are together. But with any movement of God, there is going to be problems and difficulties. Even in the church. The church at Jerusalem seems to have tolerated Peter's report of what happened at Cornelius' house, and sent Barnabas to the church at Antioch to report back. And no doubt they seem to tolerate these outbreaks of faith. But now the gospel begins to explode in primarily Gentile areas and this is through the area of Galatia. Many Jewish believers, who have been brought up in their traditions would have a hard time thinking differently about circumcision or about dietary laws, or whether one had to become a Jew in order to be truly saved. And this will challenge the church to really define the nature of salvation. And surprisingly, through the grace of God, God will use a man that used to be so entrenched in traditions, none other than Paul to really help define the nature of saving faith. There will not be two salvations — one for Jews and one for Gentiles, or two churches — but one. But with growth comes the potential of problems. We have been given a new nature and we are redeemed and

all connected to Christ, but we are in the process of being sanctified, and therefore more sinners always has the potential of problems and schisms and even elitism.

Now look how the chapter ends, “**And they remained no little time with the disciples.**” They remained with the believers at Antioch, and no doubt this time of fellowship was sweet and warm. It was glorious and refreshing. And again, we all need those times. We all need the ministry of others. We all need individuals to lovingly and honestly speak truth into our lives. We all need rest. We all need the ministry of the people of God in our lives. It is absolutely spiritual to realize the importance of having others pray and minister to us. But as we read the report of the missionaries, we realize in many, many ways, these are just ordinary men. Certainly they have a love for Christ and God has given them certain talents but they are just ordinary men. The thing that is extraordinary about them in the God they serve — the Christ they proclaim. And it is incredible that God can use such unpromising vessels like you and me. Aren’t you amazed at that? When you consider who we are and the monumental task God has given us. But here is the thing, ministry to others, the upbuilding of the people of God, even the call of others to Christ just doesn’t happen. God has chosen to use our efforts for his glory. But it is effort. It is toil and work. How about you? Are you working out your salvation with fear and trembling? Are you growing to know him so that you have something to give? It really will surprise you when we trust and labour for him what the Lord has done. No doubt Paul and Barnabas are surprised by the effect grace of God working through them. Let’s let God surprise us as we labour for him!