

LESSON 3

Equipping Through Suffering: Paul and Barnabas in Lystra

Acts 14:1–28

It is necessary to go through many hardships to enter the kingdom of God.

Acts 14:22

Class Overview: Acts 14 shows that suffering isn't a sign of failure but a part of God's plan to strengthen His followers. As Paul and Barnabas traveled through Iconium, Lystra, and Derbe, they experienced both success and intense opposition. Yet, through every challenge, God equipped them to stand firm, stay humble, and persevere with joy. This lesson reminds us that hardship is one of God's most effective tools for shaping faith, preparing His people, and demonstrating the power of the gospel to endure in all circumstances.

Class Objectives:

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By the end of this class, you should be able to:

1. Summarize the main events in Acts 14 and how Paul and Barnabas responded to persecution.
2. Explain how God uses suffering to mature and equip believers for continued ministry.
3. Identify the dangers of pride in moments of success and how humility protects faith.
4. Recognize that perseverance and endurance are essential qualities of true discipleship.
5. Apply the example of Paul and Barnabas by viewing personal hardship as an opportunity to glorify God and strengthen others.

Introduction

THE ROAD TO MISSION IS NOT ALWAYS SMOOTH. Acts 14 reminds us that the same Spirit who empowers us to serve also sustains us when the path grows rough. Paul and Barnabas had seen great success in Pisidian Antioch, but success was followed by suffering. As they traveled on to Iconium, Lystra, and Derbe, they met both open hearts and angry mobs. Some believed the message; others tried to silence it. Yet through it all, they kept preaching, kept moving, and kept trusting God.

Acts 14 reveals that suffering is not a setback in God's work; it is part of it. The gospel progresses through struggle as much as through peace. God uses opposition to refine His servants and deepen their reliance on Him. Paul and Barnabas didn't give up when they faced opposition, misunderstanding, or even stoning. They got back up, continued the work, and encouraged others to do the same.

The story of Lystra also exposes how quickly human praise can turn to hostility. One day, the people tried to worship Paul and Barnabas as gods; the next, they stoned Paul and dragged him out of the city. Yet the mission continued. God's servants learned that the same Spirit who calls and sends also comforts and sustains.

We need to see hardship through the same lens. When we face rejection, criticism, or pain for doing what is right, we are not abandoned; we are being equipped. The Spirit who helped Paul stand back up helps us stand, too. Through suffering, God strengthens faith, shapes character, and prepares His people for greater service in His kingdom.

Historical Background

After leaving Pisidian Antioch, Paul and Barnabas traveled southeast about 80 miles to Iconium, a large and prosperous city in the region of Lycaonia. It was a mixed community of Greeks, Jews, and Romans. As was their pattern, they began preaching in the synagogue, and many believed. But again, opposition arose. Some Jews stirred up hostility and divided the city. The apostles stayed as long as they could, boldly speaking for the Lord, until the tension grew so great that they were forced to leave.

They next came to Lystra, a small, rural town with little Jewish presence. There may not have even been a synagogue there. The people spoke in the local Lycaonian dialect and practiced pagan worship. When Paul healed a man who had been crippled from birth, the crowd was amazed. They shouted that the gods had come down in human form and began calling Barnabas “Zeus” and Paul “Hermes.” The priest of Zeus even brought oxen and garlands to offer sacrifices to them.

This misunderstanding shows how much pagan religion influenced the people’s thinking. According to their myths, the gods sometimes appeared as men, so they thought the miracle meant divine visitors had arrived. Paul and Barnabas tore their clothes in distress, begging the people to turn from idols to the living God, who made heaven and earth. But soon, Jewish opponents from Antioch and Iconium arrived, turned the crowd against them, and Paul was stoned and left for dead outside the city.

Incredibly, Paul survived. The believers gathered around him, and he got up and returned to the city. The next day, he and Barnabas went to Derbe, where they made many disciples. Then, instead of heading directly home, they retraced their steps—going back to Lystra, Iconium, and Antioch to strengthen the new believers and appoint elders in each church.

The events in Acts 14 illustrate both the risks and the resolve involved in early gospel work. These cities, each facing its own difficulties, became training grounds where Paul and Barnabas learned to persevere. Through persecution, confusion, and hardship, God equipped them to trust Him more fully and to inspire others to do the same.

Equipped to Stand Firm in Opposition (14:1-7)

Paul and Barnabas began their work in Iconium much like they had in other cities: by going to the synagogue and preaching the word of God. Luke records that *a great number of both Jews and Greeks believed* (v. 1). The gospel once again proved its power to unite people from different backgrounds. Wherever the message of Christ is preached with boldness, hearts are changed.

But opposition quickly arose. Some Jews who refused to believe stirred up hostility and poisoned others' minds against the brothers. Instead of fleeing, Paul and Barnabas stayed. Luke says they *remained there a long time and spoke boldly for the Lord* (v. 3). They understood that truth is worth defending and that perseverance often brings quiet victories in hostile places. God confirmed their message by enabling them to perform signs and wonders, demonstrating His presence and power.

Eventually, the city was divided; some supported the apostles, while others sided with their enemies. A plan to mistreat and stone them was formed, so they fled to the surrounding region of Lycaonia, including Lystra and Derbe. However, even as they departed, they were not retreating out of fear. They left to continue their preaching rather than to escape trouble. And Luke says, *there they kept on preaching the gospel.* (v. 7)

That simple statement captures the core of faithful endurance. No matter where they went, they kept teaching. The Holy Spirit had empowered them with courage that outlasted criticism and strength that overcame fear. They understood that opposition does not mean failure—it means the message is being heard.

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Every Christian will face opposition in some form. Faithfulness often causes conflict. The key is not to give up but to stay rooted in the Lord's purpose. God does not guarantee ease, but He does guarantee endurance. When we remain firm in truth, even under pressure, He uses our perseverance to draw others to the gospel.

Equipped to Remain Humble in Success (14:8–18)

In Lystra, Paul and Barnabas encountered a man who had been crippled since birth and had never walked. As Paul preached, he noticed a willingness to believe in the man's face. Paul called out, "*Stand up on your feet!*" and the man immediately leapt to his feet and began walking. The miracle was undeniable. The crowd erupted in excitement—yet what happened next revealed how easily people can misunderstand God's message.

The people shouted in their local language, ‘*The gods have come down to us in human form!*’ They called Barnabas “Zeus” and Paul ‘Hermes’ because Paul was the main speaker. Soon, the priest of Zeus brought oxen and garlands to offer sacrifices to them. To the people of Lystra, this appeared to be an act of gratitude and worship. To Paul and Barnabas, it was a disaster. They tore their clothes in grief and rushed into the crowd, pleading with them to stop.

Their response showed genuine humility. Instead of accepting praise or enjoying the attention, they credited all glory to God. They exclaimed, *we are people also, just like you!* and urged the crowd to turn away from useless idols toward the living God who made heaven and earth. Paul’s brief sermon at that moment offers a glimpse of how he addressed Gentiles with little knowledge of Scripture. He started not with prophecy but with creation, illustrating that the one true God is the source of life and blessing.

Even with these words, the people barely held back from offering sacrifices. This moment of misguided worship reminds us how quickly admiration can turn into idolatry and how crucial it is for God’s servants to stay humble when people start to praise them.

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God often uses success to test the heart as much as He uses suffering. When others celebrate our work or speak well of us, humility keeps us humble. Paul and Barnabas knew that every miracle and soul saved belonged to God’s power, not theirs. They didn’t seek applause; they sought obedience.

The Spirit empowers us to face both hardship and honor. Pride can ruin ministry as easily as persecution. When God blesses our efforts, we should, like Paul and Barnabas, keep our focus upward—away from ourselves and back to the Lord who deserves all glory.

Equipped to Persevere Through Suffering (14:19–28)

Just as the crowd in Lystra was ready to worship Paul and Barnabas, enemies from Antioch and Iconium arrived and quickly turned that same crowd against them. Human admiration can shift to hostility very

fast. The people who had once shouted praises now picked up stones. They dragged Paul out of the city, assuming he was dead.

This was one of the darkest and most painful moments of Paul's ministry. Yet it also revealed the depth of his faith. Luke tells us that, *after the disciples gathered around him, he got up and went into the town.* (v. 20) The very place where he had been stoned became the place where he rose again to continue the work. There's no record of complaint or self-pity, just quiet determination. God was not finished with him yet.

The next day, Paul and Barnabas went to Derbe and made many disciples. But what stands out most is what they did afterward. Instead of taking the easy route home, they retraced their steps, going back to Lystra, Iconium, and Antioch, the same cities where they had faced violence and rejection. Their goal was not survival but strengthening. They returned to encourage the new Christians, *strengthening the disciples and encouraging them to continue in the faith.* (v. 22).

Their message was clear and honest: *It is necessary to go through many hardships to enter the kingdom of God.* They didn't sugarcoat the cost of discipleship. Following Christ involves trials, but those trials produce endurance and maturity.

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Before leaving, Paul and Barnabas appointed elders in every church, prayed with fasting, and commended them to the Lord. The young congregations would need strong leadership and deep trust in God to endure. Finally, the missionaries returned to Antioch, the church that had sent them out, and reported all that God had done. Despite persecution, the mission had succeeded; new churches were planted, and the gospel had taken root.

Suffering is never wasted when it is endured for Christ. The same Spirit who called and sent Paul also strengthened him to rise again, to return, and to keep going. Every hardship became part of his equipping. God still works that way today, teaching His servants to trust Him more deeply through trials so they can strengthen others in faith.

Lesson Summary and Reflection

Key Truths from Lystra:

- God often uses hardship to equip and mature His servants.
- Courage in opposition comes from confidence in God's word and presence.
- Humility in success protects the heart and keeps glory where it belongs—with God.
- Perseverance through suffering strengthens faith and encourages others.
- The path of discipleship includes hardship, but every trial can become a testimony of God's grace.

Acts 14 reminds us that God's servants are not exempt from suffering; they are shaped by it. Paul and Barnabas encountered opposition, misunderstanding, violence, and fatigue, yet they persisted in proclaiming Christ. Whether driven out of towns or welcomed by new believers, they viewed every situation as part of God's plan.

In Iconium, they learned to stand firm in opposition. In Lystra, they learned humility in success. In Derbe and on their return trip, they learned endurance through suffering. Each trial became a tool in God's hands, equipping them to lead with deeper faith and greater compassion.

The main message in this passage is captured in Paul's words: *it is necessary to face many hardships to enter the kingdom of God.* (v. 22). Hardship is not punishment; it is preparation. God uses difficulty to strengthen His people and to demonstrate the value of the gospel to a watching world.

As Christians today, we need the same endurance. Faith that costs nothing achieves little. But when we cling to Christ through pain, rejection, or loss, our testimony becomes brighter. God never wastes suffering. Every trial teaches us trust, and every scar tells a story of His sustaining grace.

Memory Verse and Weekly Challenge

It is necessary to go through many hardships to enter the kingdom of God.
Acts 14:22 (CSB)

Weekly Challenge: When you face difficulty this week, pause and pray, “Lord, use this to strengthen my faith.” Think of one person who may be struggling and share with them how God has helped you endure. Your story may give them courage to keep going.

For Discussion

1. How did Paul and Barnabas show faithfulness when they faced opposition in Iconium?

2. What can we learn from their reaction when the people of Lystra tried to worship them as gods?

3. How does Paul’s response to being stoned and left for dead reveal the strength of his faith?

4. What does Acts 14:22 teach us about the role of suffering in the Christian life?

5. How can your experiences of hardship or disappointment become opportunities to strengthen others in faith?
