

## Strengthening The Church

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Acts: The Spirit Moving / Acts 14:8-20 / November 16, 2025

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### Introduction:

Our passage this morning, in Acts 14:20-26, provides a short summary of the final movements of Paul and Barnabas' gospel work in Pisidia Antioch, Iconium, Lystra, and Derbe. And Luke's composition of this summary draws our attention to how Paul and Barnabas completed the work they were commissioned for. Look at the overarching flow with me. Start in verses 20-21, "But when the disciples gathered about him, he rose up and entered the city, and on the next day he went on with Barnabas to Derbe. When they had preached the gospel to that city and had made many disciples, they returned to Lystra and to Iconium and to Antioch." After being stoned, Paul miraculously rises up and walks back into Lystra before setting out on a sixty-mile journey to Derbe the next day. Note how Luke quickly details their work in Derbe before telling us they returned to Lystra, Iconium, and Antioch. Jump down to verses 24-26, "Then they passed through Pisidia and came to Pamphylia. And when they had spoken the word in Perga, they went down to Attalia, and from there they sailed to Antioch, where they had been commended to the grace of God for the work that they had fulfilled." Once again, few details describe Paul and Barnabas passing through cities and preaching in Perga, before showing their return to Syria Antioch, where Luke says, "they had been commended to the grace of God for the work that they had fulfilled." In this closing summary, Luke quickly moves through gospel witness in Derbe and Perga while pointing to Paul and Barnabas fulfilling their work. But notice how these things bookend a depth of details in verses 21-23, "they returned to Lystra and to Iconium and to Antioch, 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. And when they had appointed elders for them in every church, with prayer and fasting they committed them to the Lord in whom they had believed." Not only that but consider the path they traveled to return. Couldn't they have moved on to Cilicia and set sail from Tarsus, or continued on to Syria Antioch? Yet, they choose instead to retrace their steps, going back to places where they faced strong opposition. These locations and depth of details highlight the significance of what takes place in verses 22-23. And I see three things for us to consider. First,

### The Need for Strengthening

Consider what Luke says they were doing on their return. Look at verse 22, they were "strengthening the souls of the disciples, encouraging them to continue in the faith." Pause there. "Strengthening" and "encouraging" are technical Greek terms used often to speak of solidifying faith and establishing churches. Note how the emphasis falls on spiritual care that involved specific encouragement to continue. Continuing faith has been a consistent theme. In Acts 11:23, Barnabas, "exhorted them all to remain faithful to the Lord with steadfast purpose." In 13:43, Paul, "urged them to continue in the grace of God." And this theme resounds in Scripture. In John 8:31, Jesus said, "If you abide in my word, you are truly my disciples." Colossians 1:22-23 says, "[Christ] has now reconciled in his body of flesh by his death, in order to present you holy and blameless and above reproach before him, if indeed you continue in the faith, stable and steadfast, not shifting from the hope of the gospel that you heard." In 2 Timothy 3:14, Paul tells Timothy, "Continue in what you have learned and have firmly believed." In Hebrews 10:23, we are told to, "hold fast the confession of our hope without wavering," and in Hebrews 10:36, that we, "have need of endurance." Family, faith is not simply a one-time act. There is initial belief in the saving work of Jesus Christ that secures our forgiveness, where we cry out for mercy and trust in His death and resurrection. But that faith becomes an ongoing way of life. What helps us continue in the faith? Receiving regular strengthening from God's Word through teaching and exhortation. Paul tells Timothy, "Keep a close watch on yourself and on the teaching. Persist in this, for by so doing you will save both yourself and your hearers." Jude 20-21 says, "building yourselves up in your most holy faith and praying in the Holy Spirit, keep yourselves in the love of God, waiting for the mercy of our Lord Jesus Christ that leads to eternal life."

We keep ourselves in the God's love and faithfully wait for Christ's return by persisting in faithful teaching to build ourselves up in the faith. Paul and Barnabas' work on their return highlights the need for strengthening. So, one application question for this morning is, are you prioritizing your need to be strengthened? Church, we don't commend regular involvement in our worship gatherings, classes, studies, and ministries to feel successful as a church. We commend these things for strengthening your souls. If you trust in Jesus Christ but treat receiving teaching and exhortation as optional, you will struggle to continue in the faith. See your need for strengthening from Paul and Barnabas' willingness to risk more suffering and prioritize that care for your soul. Second, we see,

### **The Value of Truth**

Pay attention to how they encourage these believers. Look at verse 22 again, they were "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." This is not what you will hear in many churches today. Proclaiming tribulations are necessary is not a church growth strategy. We want Christ to solve our problems, change our situations, heal our ailments, remove our struggles, and make our lives comfortable. Don't hear me wrong, He does at times. Yet, Paul and Barnabas say, to relatively new believers, that to enter the kingdom of God, we must go through difficulties, hardships, and suffering. And, church, this isn't something they are pulling out of thin air or something that only applies to these believers. Jesus says in John 16:33, "In the world you will have tribulation." Peter says in 1 Peter 4:12, "Beloved, do not be surprised at the fiery trial when it comes upon you to test you, as though something strange were happening to you." Through trials and tribulations, we must enter the kingdom of God. One of our friends who has counseled women experiencing tribulations we can't begin to fathom once suggested the most valuable truth for today is a right theology of suffering. I believe she is right, so I want to strengthen our theology of suffering this morning. Why must we enter the kingdom of God through tribulations? One reason is because we have an enemy to the gospel who is active and powerful. Paul tells us the Devil is "over this present darkness" and "the spiritual forces of evil." Peter says he "prowls around like a roaring lion, seeking someone to devour." We have a real and dangerous enemy. Yet, we must understand he is not all powerful, and everything still falls under the authority of our Sovereign God. So, why does God allow us to suffer? Scripture gives some reasons to consider. First, it might be from loving discipline. Hebrews 12:6 says, "the Lord disciplines the one he loves, and chastises every son whom he receives." Sometimes God, in His love for us, uses trials to help us see the futility of our actions and draw us back to Him. So, through tribulations we must enter the kingdom of God because they are God's loving discipline. However, not every tribulation is due to discipline. James 1:2-4 says, "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." Trials and tribulations are designed to produce a steadfast faith that helps us lack in nothing. And that steadfast faith, James 1:12 says, brings the reward of the crown of life. So, through tribulations we must enter the kingdom of God because they produce steadfast faith that has great rewards. Yet, that is not the only good in tribulations. While speaking about suffering in Romans 8, Paul says in Romans 8:28, "we know that for those who love God all things work together for good, for those who are called according to his purpose." Sadly, some have suggested this means if we love God, we will always experience good things. But listen to verse 29, "For," this is the reason we know all things work together for good, "For those whom he foreknew he also predestined to be conformed to the image of his Son." The primary good is being conformed into the image of Jesus. So, through tribulations we must enter the kingdom of God because they conform us into the image of Jesus Christ. Yet, there is another beautiful thing tribulations bring. Turn to the book of Philippians with me. At the end of Philippians 1, Paul urges the church in Philippi to continue in the faith despite their hardships. Look at what he tells them in verses 28-29, not to be "frightened in anything by your opponents. This is a clear sign to them of their destruction, but of your salvation, and that from God.

For it has been granted to you that for the sake of Christ you should not only believe in him but also suffer for his sake.” Underline that word granted. It is the Greek word for grace. Do you see what Paul is saying? Their suffering is a gift of God’s grace in the same way their faith is a gift of grace. How can suffering be a gift of grace? Move over to Philippians 3:8-10. In verse 8, Paul says, “For his [Christ’s] sake I have suffered the loss of all things,” using the same language from chapter 1. Then, he gives the purpose at the end of verses 8 and 10, “in order that I may gain Christ...that I may know him and the power of his resurrection, and may share in his sufferings.” Suffering can be a gift of God’s grace because, in our sufferings, we share in Christ’s sufferings. I am persuaded this means we gain a more intimate connection with Christ through suffering. And that is our greatest good, to know and gain Christ. So, through tribulations we must enter the kingdom of God because they are a gracious gift of unique connection with our savior. Family, Paul and Barnabas’ emphasis on the reality of tribulation shows the value of truth. It doesn’t help to pretend we won’t experience tribulations, and it is harmful to believe the lies that they only come from our lack of faith or the enemies’ attacks. In every tribulation, God’s sovereign hand is working for your good. If you are in the midst of trials and tribulations, let this truth strengthen your faith and help you continue in the faith today. Third, in verse 23, we see,

### **The Importance of Elders**

Paul and Barnabas took one more step to ensure these churches were firmly established. Look at verse 23, “And when they had appointed elders for them in every church, with prayer and fasting they committed them to the Lord in whom they had believed.” Note the language. They appointed elders (plural) in every church (singular). They did not see their mission as complete until they appointed a plurality of elders in every church. Paul does the same thing in Crete, telling Titus, “This is why I left you in Crete, so that you might put what remained into order, and appoint elders (plural) in every town (singular) as I directed you.” Now, pay attention to the care they took in this at the end of verse 23, “with prayer and fasting they committed them to the Lord.” These are the same actions taken in Paul and Barnabas’ commissioning. Actions that emphasize seeking the Spirit’s guidance and confirmation in these appointments. This wasn’t a bunch of people saying, “I think they have the skills to manage the affairs of the church.” It was a dependence on the Spirit to reveal who He had equipped, gifted, and called. Why did they take the time and care to appoint elders in every church? Because they knew these believers would need continual strengthening and encouragement to continue in the faith, and elders continue that work. Church, while it is necessary for elders to make wise decisions for the church as an organization, that is not their primary function. When Paul gathers the elders at Ephesus in Acts 20, he doesn’t say, “make sure the church is running smoothly.” He says, “Pay careful attention...to all the flock, in which the Holy Spirit has made you overseers, to care for the church of God, which he obtained with his own blood.” In 1 Peter 5:1-4, Peter says, “I exhort the elders among you, as a fellow elder... shepherd the flock of God that is among you, exercising oversight, not under compulsion, but willingly, as God would have you; not for shameful gain, but eagerly; not domineering over those in your charge, but being examples to the flock. And when the chief Shepherd appears, you will receive the unfading crown of glory.” 1 Thessalonians 5:12 says leaders, or elders, “labor among you and are over you in the Lord and admonish you.” In Hebrews 13:17, we are told, “they are keeping watch over your souls, as those who will have to give an account.” Elders are shepherds, or pastors who primarily care for the souls of disciples. They prioritize the spiritual needs of people, leading the church through teaching and exhortation, and serve as examples of how to continue in the faith. Family, I think this calls for a course correction in our churches today. Biblical elders are not a non-profit board of directors, and pastors aren’t program directors. When we think of elders as a board of directors, and pastors as program directors, we treat them as those who field complaints and can be influenced to make changes and decisions we desire, rather than those we seek encouragement from and go to for prayer. And we are tempted look for people to make good business decisions or run exciting programs, rather than taking the same care Paul and Barnabas took to appoint qualified and called shepherds.

So, as we apply verse 23, I think we need to ask if we understand the importance of elders and pastors. Do we see our elders and pastors as those who labor among us and are over us and admonish us? Do you seek them out for encouragement and prayer? Does the Spirit guide our appointment of them? To my fellow elders and pastors, I see conviction for us as well. Do we primarily see our role as decision makers and those who guide programs? Or is our primary concern to keep watch over the souls God has placed in our care? Are we filtering everything through how it is strengthening and encouraging disciples to continue in the faith? Are we striving to set an example for this flock? These are the things God has called us to and should prioritize.

**Conclusion:**

As the worship team is coming to lead us in a time of reflection and response today, I want to ask the elders and pastors to come down to the front as well to be available for encouragement and prayer. I am not naive enough to think there are none here today who need their souls strengthened. Perhaps you are wondering how you will continue in the faith with the tribulation you are currently facing. Maybe you have been waiting for the Lord to comfort you and provide the peace He has promised. If you are weary and in need of encouragement, seek God's grace this morning. If you need healing or peace, come and receive prayer in your need. Family, we hold this time of reflection and response each week because we don't pretend to have everything together. We know the fight of faith, and we recognize our constant need to be strengthened and encouraged. The reason we have an extended time of worship following the preaching of God's Word is to provide a space for that. A space to seek the Spirit's help and guidance in response to what He has revealed in the Word. We always have a team of people ready to pray with anyone who has a need, but I thought it would be appropriate to have our pastors and elders be available with me this morning as those who are primarily charged with caring for your souls. So, come today if you see your need for strengthening and encouraging, and let us care for your soul. We have asked a few women from our prayer team to be available as well if you would desire a woman to pray with. During this time, we will be worshipping on the front rows and you can come to any of us for strengthening and encouragement. As always, you are also welcome to come and kneel before the Lord in a posture of humility to seek Him personally. Press into God's grace and find all that you need in Him. Would you pray with me as we respond to God's Word together?